

## BOTTOM RAIL ON TOP

### A Devotional Meditation on Mishpatim (Ordinances)

Exodus 21:1-24:18; Jeremiah 33:25-26, 34:8-22

Isaiah 2:1-4; Matthew 19:3-9; Galatians 3:28-29; Colossians 3:9-11;

1 Timothy 6:1-2; Titus 2:1-15

Albert J. McCarn

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The American Civil War is more than a century and a half behind us. That's why we don't understand the magnitude of the transformation that conflict brought on our nation. The staggering number of 620,000 soldiers dead doesn't approach the total cost of families disrupted, economies shattered, social structures demolished, and power reapportioned in every way. There's a famous story that explains the magnitude of change in a few words:



*Split rail fence along a dirt road. Photo by Janine, October 23, 2011, [via Flickr](#).*

In 1865 a black soldier who recognized his former master among a group of Confederate prisoners he was guarding called out a greeting: "Hello, massa; bottom rail on top dis time!"\*

The image that soldier invoked is of a rail fence, the kind he probably built and mended on his former master's farm. The fence would have marked the boundary of his master's property, or the boundary between the crops and the livestock. Whatever the purpose, there would always be a top rail and a bottom rail. On the farm, the rails would be interchangeable and indistinguishable. What this African American soldier may have realized is that it's the same with human beings. The problem is, we're always trying to sort out who should be which rail. Most of us probably don't care very much about being on top, but none of us wants to be the Bottom Rail.

This is where we need God's help. What He's been telling us from the beginning is that He alone is the Top Rail. We still wrestle with that, but at least we can agree to it in principle and try to live like we believe it. The bigger problem is that we're still arguing about which rails go next, and which ones are at the bottom. This is especially true when earth-shattering events change everything we know about the existing order. The American Civil War was one such event, and so was Israel's Exodus from Egypt.

If we don't understand the magnitude of the transformation that happened to the United States during the Civil War, we certainly don't get the magnitude of transformation that happened to Israel and to Egypt in the Exodus. The Hebrew Bottom Rail most certainly came out on top, and that was just the beginning of troubles. The Hebrews shut

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\* James M. McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 862. McPherson drew the quote from Leon F. Litwack, *Been in the Storm So Long: The Aftermath of Slavery* (New York, 1979), 489.

their doors on the night of the Passover as Egypt's oppressed underclass, subject to the whims of their Egyptian masters. When they opened their doors the next morning, they had become something else. Not the new masters; if they had been, they wouldn't have been expelled from the country.

They weren't oppressed anymore, and they certainly weren't an underclass. The God of the Universe had intervened on their behalf because He had chosen them as His special possession among all the peoples on the earth. That's why He promised to send His own Angel to lead them and fight for them, and why He invited Moses and the Elders of Israel to dine in His Presence as representatives of the whole nation.

If anything, though, this must have made the new Israelite reality even more complicated. If all of them were special in the Creator's eyes, who would take out the trash, clean the latrines, and wait on tables? How could they get any work done, or accumulate any wealth, if they didn't have servants and slaves?

Then there was that awkward question about all the Egyptians and other foreigners who chose to join Israel when they saw the power of Israel's God. Many of them would have been the former Top Rails. Where would they fit now? Would they willingly take the place of their former slaves, or would the native Hebrews somehow have to bring them into submission? Surely God didn't intend them to be equals?

Actually, God did intend that. It's built into the ordinances He explained to Moses as the outline of how this new society would be organized. Some of those ordinances we appreciate, like the parts about a thief making restitution, or a homeowner having the right to defend his property. Some of it we find horrendous, such as regulation of bondservants, or institutionalized patriarchy that allows a father to sell his daughter – even if the sale is a transaction leading to his daughter's arranged marriage. It's easy to say that those were the standards of the Ancient Near East, but to our eyes those standards were unjust, and yet somehow they found their way into the Torah.

But then, we really don't understand God's ways, and we're not often willing or able to consider His ways in context. It helps if we consider how our Messiah dealt with the ancient provisions of Torah, such as when someone asked Him why Moses allowed divorce. His answer is instructive:

*Yeshua* said to them, "Because of your hardness of heart Moses permitted you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so. Now I tell you, whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery."

Matthew 19:8-9 TLV

It seems reasonable that this answer would apply to so many other difficult parts of what we have come to know as the Law of Moses. It may be that God never intended for men to dominate women, or for one segment of society to be lords and masters over another, but because of the hardness of our hearts, He made provision to regulate these things until they were no longer part of our reality. I'm not sure we have reached that enlightened point, but it's clear that people living in *Yeshua's* time hadn't. That's why we hear echoes of Moses in the words of Paul:

Let all who are under the yoke as slaves consider their own masters worthy of full respect, so that God's name and our teaching may not be slandered. And let those who have believing masters not disrespect them because they are brothers, but serve them even more, since those who share in the benefit are believers and loved. Teach and encourage these things.

1 Timothy 6:1-2 TLV

If Paul were writing today, would he write something similar to employees, whom some describe as wage slaves? What would he say knowing that half of the employees, at least in the Western world, are women – and that often they are as skilled as their male counterparts, but still have more difficulty getting promotions and commensurate compensation? What would Paul say to those working women who don't have good relationships with their fathers, if they've ever had any relationship at all?

These realities of life are what take God's instructions and commandments out of the realm of academic debate. We need to know how His ways apply to the reality of our daily lives, and whether His ways really do make a difference for good. He is our Sovereign Creator, but He allows us to ask Him hard questions – even questions about whether His instructions could be tweaked to fit our realities.

Yeshua didn't abolish the Torah which His Father gave to Moses, but He did make adjustments in how our ancestors applied it in His day. When He returns as King of the World, and He sends forth His law from Zion to the nations, we can expect some additional adjustments to reflect how a whole world full of redeemed people are supposed to treat each other. Those instructions may help us better understand what it means to be one in Messiah, with no distinction between male and female, Jew and Greek, barbarian and Scythian, slave and free person.

We don't really know whether there will be Bottom Rails in Messiah's Kingdom, but even if there are, they will have the same value and dignity as the most honorable and powerful among us. That's why the best thing we can do to prepare for the Kingdom is to start treating everyone as if the Bottom Rail were already on top.