

WE ARE GOD'S SERVANTS

by Rabbi Berel Wein

The Torah prescribes that a Jewish servant who wishes to remain permanently in servitude - he loves his master's home and his family - is given a permanent mark, a hole in his ear, as an everlasting reminder of his choice. Rashi explains, based on the Talmud, that the ear that heard on Sinai that the Jewish people are God's servants and not to be servants to other humans is to be drilled with an awl as a stark reminder of his poor choice in life.

The Talmud taught us that a truly free person is someone whose guide in life is Torah. The choice of servitude over freedom is anti-Jewish and anti-Torah in its very makeup. In the ancient world and even in later times, slaves were branded so that all could see that they were the chattel of their owner.

The Torah's instruction to bore a hole in the ear of the Jewish servant was to remind everyone of just the opposite idea. That this slave belonged to no other human but rather was to be a servant of God - that was the message of the drilled ear. Freedom and independence mean that we bow to no one but to our Creator alone.

Having other masters in life is a rejection of the Jewish mission and Judaism's true understanding of life's purpose. Jews have often in our long history been made to serve in involuntary servitude and slavery. But voluntarily giving up one's freedom of action and behavior is abhorrent to Jewish ideals and tradition.

The ancient world, as well as much of the later worlds, was built upon the institution of slavery, forced labor and involuntary servitude. In our time governments that preached equality and nobility enslaved others simply because they suspected them of having different ideas.

The mocking slogan at the entrance to Auschwitz "Work makes one free" symbolized the ultimate form of slavery and murder. The Gulag was the place where millions succumbed doing useless work. The great White Sea Canal of Stalin was literally a canal that led to nowhere while myriads of people died in the process of building it, often only with their bare hands.

The Jewish people were coming forth from Egypt after centuries of slavery. One would have thought that having themselves experienced that type of servitude they would not wish to inflict it upon others. However Midrash teaches us that even in Egypt there were Jews who somehow

owned other Jews as slaves. It would take millennia for Jews to be completely weaned from the practice of slavery.

Such is the dark side of human nature and behavior. But the process of drilling the ear of one who wishes to remain a permanent slave reminds the Jewish society of the inherent wrong in the deprivation of people's freedom. Only God has the right to ask us to be His servants. And those who truly serve God have no interest in depriving others of their freedom. The message of freedom that was heard on Sinai should reverberate in all of our ears constantly.

Shabat shalom, Rabbi Berel Wein

Rabbi Berel Wein- Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at www.rabbiwein.com