

And his master shall bore through his ear with the awl. (21:6)

Rashi quotes the well-known statement of *Chazal*, “The ear that heard at *Har Sinai Lo signov*, you shall not steal, and this one went and stole – it should be pierced with an awl.” The question is obvious: Is it not late for the reminder concerning *Lo signov*? The man stole six years ago. He did not have the money to pay his debt. As a result, he was sold into slavery for six years. Now, he seeks to extend his servitude. After all, he is happy here – nice boss, nice wife, nice children. Why ruin it all and leave? He might even have to go to work and earn a living! He should have had his ear pierced when he perpetrated the theft. Why did it happen six years later?

In his *Yabia Omer*, *Horav Yehudah Leib Grubart* cites an analogy to explain this. There was a Jew who did not go out of his way to work too hard at *mitzvah* observance. He was committed, but on his terms, when it was convenient. At times, he would recite *Krias Shma* at the required time. At times, he even put on his *Tefillin* before sunset. At times, he even attended *minyan* in *shul*. In other words, he never committed a grave sin (according to today’s standards). He simply stayed within the parameters of observance, so that no one could suggest that he did not practice.

One day, his evil inclination got the better of him, and he committed a grave sin, a truly egregious transgression. There was no covering up. He was taken to the *rav* to discuss his punishment. “Since you committed such a terrible sin, I fine you five thousand dollars, to be distributed among the poor,” the *rav* said.

“*Rebbe!* Five thousand dollars is outrageous. I have no problem giving charity, but such an outlandish sum! *Rebbe*, please have mercy!” was the sinner’s response.

“*B’seder*, fine,” said the *rav*. “Instead of paying a five thousand dollar fine, you must fast every Monday and Thursday for the following year.”

“Fast? *Rebbe*, I am not a well man: my heart; my kidneys; I have problems with sugar. Fasting is much too dangerous an undertaking for someone in my physical condition” was the sinner’s response.

“OK. You refuse to pay a fine; you are unable to fast; then you will give up sleeping in your luxurious bed for three months. Instead, you will sleep on the floor. That will be your penance,” said the *rav*.

“On the floor? *Rebbe*, as it is I am almost a hunchback. I have back problems which require me to sleep in a specially crafted bed,” the sinner replied.

“Let me see,” said the *rav*. “You committed a grave sin, and you apparently have serious difficulties agreeing to the appropriate punishment. What should we do?”

“*Rebbe*, I have an idea. For one complete year, I will not receive an *aliyah*, be called to the Torah, *Shabbos* or during the week. That should be sufficient punishment for me,” the sinner countered.

“That is a fine? You call that punishment? For you, who hardly ever attends services in *shul*. How dare you call that penance? It is nothing more than another one of your deceptions. It will not work.”

The analogy is quite clear. A man fell to a nadir of sin to the point that he convinced himself that it was permissible to steal from a fellow Jew. He was apprehended and had no money left to pay his debt to the victim. As a result, the *bais din* sold him as a slave. Once he completed his term of punishment, he was told, “You may go. You are now a free man.” What was his response? “No, I am not leaving. I like it here. I have come to enjoy the company of my master, my wife and my children. I really would like to stay and continue my servitude.”

His reaction to being released is a clear indication that the six years of servitude had not been a punishment. A person should not want to continue as a slave, unless he enjoyed it, demonstrating that this was a vacation – not an act of penance and retribution. If this is the case, let him now have his ear pierced. Apparently, he did not hear very well when the prohibition against stealing was declared on *Har Sinai*.