

But if the bondsman shall say, “I love my master...I shall not go free...” and his master shall bore through his ear with the awl. (21:5,6)

There is no sin in the Torah for which a similar punishment is meted out. *Chazal* say that the ear is bored because it was the ear that heard Hashem say on *Har Sinai*, “To Me shall the Jewish People be servants” (*Vayikra* 25:55), and this individual then went and acquired for himself a (human) master anyway. The question is glaring: If the issue is becoming a slave, why is his ear pierced – **after** six years of servitude? It should have been done **immediately** when he sold himself as a slave. Why is he punished now, after all of this time, when he seeks to extend his servitude?

Horav Yoel Kleinerman, zl, distinguishes between the concept of *hechrech*, necessity/compulsion, and *ahavah*, liking/desire, or simply between “needs” and “wants.” We make choices in our lives. Some things fall under the category of compulsion. An example is the person who steals because he is starving; his family has nothing, and he is the sole supporter. Since no jobs are available, he has resorted to doing something which under normal circumstances, he would never have done. This does not exempt him from punishment, but he clearly did not steal just for “fun.” In desperation he was forced into a life of crime. Another example is the one who sells himself as a bondsman, so that he can support his family. Once again, he felt that it was his only option – there was no other choice. He is acting out of “need” – not out of “want.”

Now, six years later, he is freed from servitude. He should be returning home to his family. Only, he does not want to leave. He loves his job, his master, and his newly-acquired wife and children. He likes the security of a boss who takes care of him, and who looks out for his needs. He “wants” to stay, although he is **not** compelled to remain. It is not something which he “needs,” rather it’s something he “wants.” He has no shame, no guilt; he simply loves working for his master. So he is now reminded that a Jew has only one Master: Hashem. A Jew who accepts another master in addition to Hashem detracts from his relationship with the Almighty. Thus, his ear is bored, because it was the ear that heard Hashem declare that Jews are to be servants to only one Master – Hashem.

Six years earlier, he had been living under very trying circumstances – he was heavily in debt and had a family to support, with no income. He was forced into making a drastic decision about which he was not happy, but he had to take some action. However, today he is free to go. If he chooses to stay, his ear must be bored.

Our lives are filled with excuses to justify our lack of acceptance of the yoke of Torah and *mitzvos* with greater devotion, more feeling, deeper sincerity. Such people claim that it is too difficult, or too problematic; I am not cut out for it. While these rationales might be valid for some, for most they are shams, excuses – and weak excuses at best. The same individual who finds it so difficult, so demanding to serve Hashem properly, suddenly has the time, patience, dedication and

sincerity for the mundane areas of his life's endeavor. The "head" which he did not have as a *yeshivah* student confronting the "difficult" logic in the *Gemorah*, is suddenly working at full capacity in his chosen field. The bondsman who sold himself into slavery because he had no other recourse, suddenly enjoys life as a bondsman. He loves his new master, his wife and children. What had been an excuse six years ago has become an accepted way of life today. It is all about choices and the excuses we employ to enable us to make those choices.