

You shall not work with him slave labor. (25:39)

The *eved Ivri*, Jewish bondsman/slave, is not a slave in the generally accepted sense of the word. He is an indentured servant, who, for a specific period of time, neither is free to do as he wants, nor to resign his employment. Nonetheless, their masters must treat them with such delicacy and consideration that *Chazal* (*Kiddushin* 20a) say, "One who purchases a (Jewish) slave for himself buys himself a master." The master is forbidden to assign him to perform degrading work that would be relegated only to a slave. He is to be assigned skilled, dignified labor like hired help.

The *Sefer HaChinuch* writes: "Consequently, it is for a man to give thought to which labor he may order his *eved Ivri* to do...At the root of the precept lies the goal that a man should reflect in his heart that our nation is the most honorable of all, and, as a result, he will love his nation and his Torah... There is a further benefit in the matter. [As a result of reflecting on the laws of *eved Ivri*] a man will train his spirit in the quality of *chesed*, lovingkindness and compassion and will (in turn) distance himself from the evil quality of cruelty. As he prepares his spirit for goodness, he will (commensurately) receive good reward, and Hashem delights in bestowing his blessings on His human beings."

Observing the laws of *eved Ivri* means, according to the *Sefer HaChinuch*, that (obviously) one treats his servant with respect and dignity. Furthermore, he should reflect on the *mitzvah* and its message, because it teaches us a powerful lesson. It trains us in the *middah*, character trait, of *chesed*, lovingkindness. The *Chinuch* teaches that one must work on acquiring the *middah* of *chesed*, train himself in its nuances and distance himself from any form of cruelty. The result will be reward, because Hashem wants to perform kindness with he who is kind to others. The following two stories are unique *chesed* stories. The first story underscores the reward one receives for *chesed*; the second story demonstrates the extreme thoughtfulness evinced by a rare individual who performed *chesed* even after his own passing.

The first story was revealed at the funeral of *Rav Avraham Steiner, zl*, who left this world at the age of ninety-six, after witnessing and experiencing *nachas*, spiritual satisfaction, from three generations of descendants. (This is recorded by *Horav Yitzchak Zilberstein, Shlita*, in his *Mitzvos B'simchah*.) When *Rav Steiner* was queried concerning what in his mind catalyzed the *z'chus* for his extraordinary longevity and *nachas*, he related the following story.

The commandant at the concentration camp where he was interned was an especially cruel fiend, even by Nazi standards. The man did not possess an iota of compassion or human decency. He walked through the camp in constant anger, with the brutal death of a Jew being the only thing that would bring a smile to his miserable face. Every day, during "roll call," he would call out three or four names. This meant that these hapless Jews were to go to a private room to the side of the block, where they would be mercilessly tortured by the commandant. The screams were heard throughout the block. They did not last long before the *kedoshim*, martyrs, expired amid extreme, excruciating pain - to the glee and satisfaction of this human form of *Satan*.

Any Jew whose name was called out was well aware of what was in store for him. He knew that he was just moments away from terrible pain and death. The daily roll call was a mind-numbing, tension-filled experience for all the inmates. I write this just to present the emotional backdrop for what is about to happen. One day, the commandant called out the name of a Jew by the name of Steinmetz. Out of extreme fear, *Reb* Steinmetz became temporarily mute. The Nazi called his name two more times, with no response. Steinmetz was unable to extract an audible sound from his throat. The rage within the commandant began to boil over. The bile within him rose, as he began to walk through the line looking for the elusive Steinmetz, who dared to ignore his call. As he neared Steinmetz's place in the line, one of the guards erred and pointed to Steiner instead of Steinmetz.

R' Avraham Steiner realized what was happening and what was obviously about to happen to him as a result of the guard's error. Nonetheless, this holy man decided on the spot to perform the ultimate act of *chesed*. He left the line and walked with the three other unfortunates whose names had been called to the commandant's little torture room. He realized that as a result of his act of *chesed*, he was probably taking his last earthly walk.

The four just stood there waiting nervously for the beatings, the torture, the pain and, finally, death. Nothing happened. They continued to wait. Suddenly, they heard the sound of machine - gun fire coming from the place where they had just been standing. The gun shots were accompanied by terror-stricken screams coming from the inmates in line who were now being mercilessly mowed down by the accursed Nazi guards. Apparently, the Nazi fiend commandant decided to alter his daily practice: instead of murdering four prisoners, he decided to save the four and murder everyone else. R' Avraham Steiner's life was spared due to an act of *chesed*. [Rav Zilberstein discusses the *halachic* aspects of R' Steiner's decision to relinquish his life for another Jew: Was it *halachically* mandated or *middas chassidus*, an act of piety which went beyond the call of duty.]

The second story concerns *Horav Shraga Grossbard, zl*, who, during his lifetime, had purchased a burial plot on *Ha HaZeisim*, Mount Olives. When asked why he did this (knowing the danger of visiting that area of Yerushalayim), he replied that his uncle, *Horav Abba Grossbard, zl*, who died childless, was buried there. He figured that when his own children would visit his grave, they would walk over to that of his uncle and pray for his *neshamah*. This was an incredible act of posthumous *chesed*, since it compelled his own children to make a special, somewhat difficult and often dangerous, trek to his grave, all because he was thinking of his late uncle. This was clearly not your ordinary act of *chesed*.

Rav Shraga was *niftar*, passed away, during the height of the Arab Intifada, when tensions were elevated and the danger level rose exceedingly high. It was almost impossible to undertake a funeral on *Har HaZeisim* safely. In a quandary, the family turned to *Horav Elazar M. Shach, zl*, to decide between carrying out the will of the deceased and acceding to fears for their own safety. *Rav Shach* listened carefully to their query and replied that *Rav Shraga* should be buried on *Har HaZeisim*.