

**PARASHAS BEHAR**

# A Place of Refuge

How low can a Jew fall in status? Even when a Jew is overcome by such difficult circumstances that he is sold into slavery, he still retains some of his former dignity and identity. At least, he finds himself in the home of a co-religionist with a similar life style. However, enslavement to a gentile resident of Eretz Yisrael, to bear the yoke of an alien master, that is the ultimate social degradation possible for a Jew. How can this unfortunate slave maintain his ties to family and tradition under such conditions? The Torah, at the end of this week's portion, directs him to hold fast two commandments - spurning idolatry and keeping the Sabbath.

Why does the Torah single out these two particular commandments? We can easily understand why the Torah emphasizes the prohibition against idolatry, since this is the very antithesis of Judaism. But why the emphasis on the Sabbath more than on other observances such as wearing *tefillin* or studying the Torah?

We find a similar emphasis on the Sabbath in the Midrash. When Moses was a young boy growing up in Pharaoh's palace, he was extremely disturbed by the physical affliction and spiritual decline of his Jewish brethren. It occurred to him that if the Jewish people would be allowed to observe the Sabbath, they would survive the Egyptian bondage as an exalted people. The Midrash relates that Moses suggested to Pharaoh that he could significantly increase the productivity of his Jewish slaves by allowing them a day of rest to replenish their depleted stores of energy. Pharaoh followed this advice, and the productivity did indeed increase. But at the same time, the Jewish people were able to congregate and celebrate the Sabbath, thus ensuring their spiritual survival. Once again, we are presented with this question: What special powers did Moses see in the Sabbath as an antidote to enslavement?

*The rabbi of a certain well-known Ukrainian city was famous for always arguing with the Creator in defense of the Jewish people. Late one Passover night, he ran into the square and called an emergency meeting of all the Jews in the city.*

*"Quick!" he said. "Bring me all your tobacco. Right now!"*

*"But, rabbi," protested the people. "That is contraband. Anyone caught with it would be instantly executed."*

*But the rabbi would accept no excuses, and sure enough, little by little, the pile of tobacco in the square began to grow quite large.*

*The rabbi immediately called for another contraband item, and once again, he was greeted by incredulous protests. But he persisted, and slowly but surely, a second pile materialized as well.*

*“And now,” ordered the rabbi, “bring me all your bread!”*

*This time, however, all his persistence was to no avail. Not a single crumb appeared.*

*“Master of the Universe!” the rabbi cried out to the heavens. “How wonderful are your people! Look at all this contraband. All the police forces and threats of execution could not prevent them from collecting this material. But one word from You forbidding bread on Passover, spoken over three thousand years ago, and there is not one crumb in the whole city.”*

The word of the Creator is an impenetrable wall, more real than piles of brick and mortar or a battalion of soldiers. Yet it is a spiritual wall, visible to the soul but not the eye. On the Sabbath, when Hashem commands us to rest and refrain from all sorts of mundane activities, He is in effect surrounding us with spiritual walls composed of His holy words. When we enter within these sanctified walls, we are transported to higher world, a place ideally suited to communing with our inner selves, to contemplating the timeless truths of the Universe, to bonding with the Creator. This is the secret of the magical power of the Sabbath to touch the Jewish soul. Were we to emulate the Sabbath observance on an ordinary weekday, it would have no effect - because it the divine commandment that sets it apart.

For the unfortunate Jewish slaves, in Egypt as in other times, the Sabbath was the perfect place of refuge. By keeping the Sabbath they could escape the mundane world into a transcendent abode where their souls could feast on the divine aura, reinforcing their identity as exalted Jews even in a state of slavery.

In our own lives, we often find ourselves swept away by the maelstrom of seemingly endless mundane concerns and activities. Life literally enslaves us. There are bills to pay, things to do, obligations to fulfill, a never-ending succession of miles to go before we sleep. But on the Sabbath, we have the opportunity to step away from it all, to enter this spiritual edifice constructed of the divine word and enjoy a day of uninterrupted peace and spirituality. This is the special gift Hashem reserved for the Jewish people, a gift that sanctifies, enriches and elevates all the days of our lives.