

The Caesar of Rome

Otzros HaTorah cites an incredible story that gives pragmatic application to the concept that one gains deeper insight into a matter after he has personally experienced a corresponding situation. When his enemies were seeking Nero Caesar of Rome, he escaped from the capitol and hid in the home of one of his trusted servants. Word got out that Nero was in the area, and an extensive search was instituted to find the monarch. Nero had nowhere to go, but to remain in the servant's home. When the rebels came and searched the house, Nero hid beneath a bed, pushing himself as far back as possible. The rebels entered the house and took it apart. They came to the bed, and instead of looking beneath it, they ran a sword back and forth. Apparently, they did not go far enough, because the sword missed Nero by a fraction of an inch. He held his breath and - if the concept of prayer can apply to such a despot - he prayed. After awhile, the rebels gave up their search and left.

The war was finally over, and Nero's forces had triumphed. Now came the opportunity to repay those who had been faithful him. He called to the palace the servant who had risked his and his family's lives for the king and asked what he wanted as a reward. He could have anything he desired. The servant responded that he wanted just one thing. He wanted to know what went through the king's mind as he lay beneath the bed while the rebels were searching for him. How did he feel at that time? Of all the things that the servant could have requested, he chose something that made no sense. At least we understand why he was a servant.

Upon hearing his request, the king immediately instructed his guards to shackle the servant and throw him into the dungeon. The nerve of the man! His insolence was outlandish. To throw away such an unprecedented opportunity was chutzpah at its nadir. Therefore, in three days, Nero himself would perform his execution. The day of the execution arrived, and the prisoner was prepared for his final moments on earth. Nero climbed up the stairs of the gallows. He took the noose and placed it around the neck of his soon-to-be departed servant, pulling the rope slowly. The very last moment, as the servant was choking, Nero cut the rope, sparing him. At that moment, Nero whispered to the man, "Now you know how I felt under the bed!"

Nero explained his actions to the servant in the following manner: "I promised you anything that you wanted. Your request was one that simply could not be conveyed orally. I could not explain to you my true emotions. The only way that you could actually understand how I felt was to experience a similar situation first hand. I gave you the opportunity to experience what it felt like to be so close to death."

In order for Klal Yisrael to sense the inherent joy that a servant feels when he is liberated, so that they would accept the laws of eved Ivri correctly, it was essential that they hear the laws at a time when they were experiencing the joy of liberation.