

*A recent convert to Judaism was troubled by a particular verse in this week's Torah portion, Parsha. In chapter 23, verse 12 we read: "Six days you shall do your work, but on the seventh day you shall rest; that your ox and donkey may have rest... and the convert, may be refreshed." This convert was insulted. How can the Torah list first your ox, your donkeys and only at the very end list the convert. He wondered, am I truly beneath donkeys and oxen? Am I valued less than these animals?*

*He approached his local Rabbi and asked him if he was indeed valued less than simple livestock. The Rabbi gave him a very legal answer. He explained that the Torah was not at all giving priority to animals over men, but prioritizing our responsibilities. As our animals are our responsibilities, their rest is incumbent upon us, we must see to it that they do not violate the Shabbos day. The convert while, of course, treasured immensely for his elevated lofty soul; his rest is not personally incumbent upon us. As he is a fellow human being with his own free will, he can make his own decisions and therefore his Shabbat rest is not our personal responsibility.*

*While this certainly appears to be an acceptable answer, the convert was still unsatisfied, because the question seemed to have been posed to the Gerrer Rebbe, Rabbi Yitzchak Meir Alter as well. The Rebbe proceeded to provide a fascinating approach to this convert's question.*

*The Midrash (Pesikta Rabbasi, 14) relates that there was once a Jew who owned a cow with which he plowed his field. This Jew subsequently became impoverished and was forced to sell his cow to a non-Jew. The new owner plowed with the cow throughout the week, but when he took her out to the field on Shabbat, she kneeled under the yoke and refused to do any work. He hit her with his whip, but she would not budge from her place. He returned to the Jew and said to him, "Take back your cow! All week I worked with her, but today I took her out to the field and she refuses to do anything." The Jew said to the cow's purchaser: "Come with me, and I will get her to plow." When they arrived to the field where the cow lay, the Jew spoke into her ear. "My dear cow, when you were in my domain, you rested on Shabbat. But now that my sins have caused me to sell you to this gentile, please, stand up and do the will of your master!" Immediately the cow stood, prepared to work. Said the gentile to the Jew: "Have you bewitched her?" "I'm not letting you go until you tell me what you did and what you said to her." The Jew told him what he said to the cow. When this man heard this, he was shaken and amazed. He said to himself: "If this creature, which has neither language nor intelligence, recognizes her Creator, should not I, whom G-d created in His image and likeness and imbued me with intelligence and understanding?" So he went and converted to Judaism and merited to study Torah. He became known as Rabbi Yochanan ben Torta ("Rabbi Yochanan son of the Cow").*

*The Gerrer Rebbe explained that when our verse lists animals, specifically the cow first before converts, it is hinting to this story. When a Jew keeps Shabbos and insures that even his animals keep Shabbat that in turn creates converts. It is the process of Rav Yochanan ben Torta's amazing conversion to Judaism that is being hinted to in this verse.*

*When you consider the Gerrer Rebbe's explanation, as much as it may explain the order in the verse, is it really a plausible explanation? Would the Torah put oxen before converts to hint to a story that occurs thousands of years later? Why would the Torah even care if we know this tale? Is there any specific lesson to be learned from this story?*

*Perhaps the Gerrer Rebbe is teaching us a profound lesson about our adherence to Shabbat. When we truly observe Shabbat we create a sense of holiness that permeates the entire world around us. This holiness is what the Gemara calls Me'Ayn Olam Habaah, a small measure of the world to come. This weekly serene sanctity leaves its indelible mark on our families, livestock, and even upon our non-Jewish neighbors. They are all equally awed by this incredible experience. Our verse is not minimizing converts in the slightest; it is providing us with a barometer of how powerful the Shabbat experience can be. We are required to insure that our Shabbat atmosphere is not relegated to the limited confines of our personal domicile, but it is felt by the entire world around us. When even our non-Jewish neighbors recognize the beauty of Shabbat, then we will know that we have succeeded in our mission of creating a truly wondrous Shabbat atmosphere.*

**Shabbat Shalom**  
**Rabbi Meir Tannenbaum**