

Even the most cursory glance at Jewish history indicates that the Jewish people are no stranger to suffering and persecution, yet, that suffering never seems to get the better of us. No matter what terrible calamities and dire circumstances we have faced, the Jewish people continue to live on. What has allowed us to consistently persevere and outlive all our enemies? Why have other nations succumbed to defeats, exiles, and persecutions, but we have always managed to rise from the ashes? What is the secret to our national longevity? Why have the difficult or tragic times not doomed us to extinction?

The Gerrer Rebbe, R. Yitzchak Meir Alter believes that the answer can be found in an appropriate analogy from a law in this week's Torah portion. Jewish law states that if a man is caught stealing and lacks the financial means to compensate his victim, he must be sold into slavery to raise the necessary funds to pay back his debt. Yet, regardless of the outstanding balance remaining on his bill, the slavery period ends at the next Yovel, jubilee year. The Talmud derives from this Biblical clause that the law of the eved ivri, the Jewish slave, is only applicable in the period when the Yovel year is in application as well. In the years when Yovel years are not in application, neither is the law of eved ivri. Why should this entire law be nullified simply because Yovel has been discontinued. The law could still be practiced and the slavery term could simply end when the debt had been fulfilled?

The Rebbe explains that we have a unique ability to always look for the light at the end of the tunnel. No matter how dark the middle of the tunnel may seem, we always look for the brighter future ahead. In every exile we have endured, we were encouraged by the promise of G-d's redemption. When the Jews were led to Egypt by Jacob's reunion with his son, we soon found ourselves miserably enslaved and tormented by our host nation. Still, the Jews endured because of G-D's promise to take them out from Egypt and be a free and holy nation. During the 40 years that we wandered the desert, the Jews kept going because they were promised that their future homeland, the Land of Israel, awaited them just on the other side of the Jordan. When the first Temple was destroyed and the Jews were banished to Babylonia, although they sat and cried along the banks of the River Babylon, they picked themselves off the ground and they persevered during those wretched years. They endured Nebuchanazzar, Achashevrosch, and Haman. The Jews outlasted these malicious leaders because they knew the prophecy that the exile would only last for 70 years. This promise gave the Jews hope and encouragement. It reminded them to stay true to their faith and never give up on themselves.

Our continued existence is nothing short of a miracle and continually bespeaks of a higher power. Yet, it is the promise of the future that insures the future. The slave could not endure his tragic fall and survive his miserable lot without the promise of his own personal salvation. Without the promise of the Yovel, the slave would never survive to the Yovel. Few can survive suffering for undetermined time. With the knowledge that the suffering is finite comes the strength to withstand that suffering. This was the salvation of the slave and it continues to be the inspiration and prayer of the Jewish people.

Shabbat Shalom,
Rabbi Meir Tannenbaum