

But he adamantly refused... Look – with me here, my master concerns himself about nothing in the house. (39:8)

The word *va'yimaein*, “And he (Yosef), adamantly refused,” has above it a *shalsheles*, which is one of the *tamei ha'mikra*, cantillation marks, rarely used in the Torah. The few times it is used, it is for the purpose of underscoring something specific. In this case, it notes the degree of refusal manifest by Yosef – adamant. The word *shalsheles* means chain, which lends itself to an inspirational story that adds commentary to this unique cantillation mark.

Our story takes place during the dread Spanish Inquisition, when Jewish life in Spain and Portugal became meaningless, and Jewish blood flowed like water. Under the influence of the wicked Torquemada, King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella of Spain became pawns in this church leader's diabolical plan. Rarely has the church reared its ugly head as it did during the Crusades and the Inquisition. The religion that preached love had no problem altering its course to venomous hatred when it concerned the Jewish People. In 1492, the Jews of Spain were expelled from its borders. Those who remained either converted to Catholicism, or were put to death by burning in the *Auto def'e*. There were those who converted publicly, but covertly adhered to their religion. They served Hashem in cellars, basements, and anywhere else they would not be detected. To be discovered as a hidden Jew, or *converso*, as they were called, meant certain, painful death.

One of these *conversos*/Marranos (as the Spaniards referred to them) was a distinguished minister in King Ferdinand's court. In addition, he was a close, personal friend of the king. There was “nothing” the king would not do for him. Outwardly, he acted as any loyal Catholic, but, in the privacy of his own home, he maintained a strong fidelity to all of the *mitzvos*. The Inquisitors were cruel, but they were not obtuse. They were well aware that a committed Jew does not simply renege his affiliation with a religion that has endured persecution throughout the millennia. The Jews were secretly practicing their religion. The Spaniards began a campaign of ferreting out these secret Jews. Everyone was a suspect – regardless of position or social standing. This was especially true of a Jew who held a position of significance in the royal court. Everyone envied him; to take him down would be the ultimate prize.

The king's trusted friend and advisor was caught red-handed one morning, as the Inquisitors entered his home to find him in the midst of prayer wearing his *Tallis* and *Tefillin*. It was an open and shut case; he was going to be put to death in a public burning, so that all could witness the success of the Inquisition. The king intervened, but the minister refused: “I am a Jew, my dear king. I will not turn my back on my religion.” No one was able to convince the Jewish minister to change his mind. He was prepared to die – as a Jew.

The execution day came, and the entire city gathered in the public square. One could hear the crackling of flames as they rose higher and higher, ready to devour their human sacrifice. The king stood there in obvious pain. He was sending his good and trusted friend to his death. This could

not be. He would make one last effort to convince his friend that what he was doing was insane. (Interesting how they are the murderers, yet we are insane). He walked over to the minister moments before they were going to fling his body into the flames.

“I am granting you one last chance,” the king said. “Please do not be foolish. Accept my offer. If you renege Judaism and publicly accept the Catholic faith, I will reinstate you to your former prestige. You will be second only to me – the king.”

The Jewish minister looked at the king, and declared, “The *shalsheles hadoros*, ‘chain of generations,’ impels me to maintain my fidelity to my heritage. I am an important link in the glorious chain that heralds back to Mount Sinai. What you ask me to do is unthinkable. I will not break that chain!” King Ferdinand turned around and signaled the executioner to commence with the proceedings. The Jewish minister died a martyr’s death, but he would not become the broken link in the chain of generations.

When Potifar’s wife attempted to seduce Yosef with her blandishments, she presented every reason for him to concede to her wishes. Veritably, Yosef had no other way out of Egypt. He was destined to die as a slave – never to return to his ancestral home. He was alone. No one would know. He had every reason to defer to her, except one: he was not going to be the broken link in the Patriarchal chain that had begun with his great-grandfather, Avraham *Avinu*. This is why there is a *shalsheles* above *va’yimaein*. He refused. Why? He refused to break the *shalsheles*.

It is this *shalsheles ha’yuchsin*, pedigreed chain, that secular Judaism has attempted – and with many Jews has succeeded – to break, by tearing asunder their connection to the chain of Jewish lineage. Once a Jew has lost his connection, has broken away from the chain that connects him to the past, that guarantees his place for the future – it is difficult to return. It is hard for a person to climb a mountain without anything onto which he can grasp.