

The sorcerers said to Pharaoh, “It is the finger of G-d.” (8:15)

Pharaoh’s magicians were finally stymied. They could not replicate this latest plague. It must be the “finger of G-d.” To paraphrase Targum Yonasan, “This does not emanate from the powers of Moshe and Aharon.” In other words, until this juncture, the magicians were able to duplicate the “miraculous” acts that “seemed” to be the result of Moshe’s and Aharon’s mystical powers. Consequently, they refused to believe that Hashem had sent them, that He was the source of these miracles. Now that they saw that this plague was beyond their magical ability, they conceded that there must be a Divine element involved.

In truth, the magicians already were acutely aware that they were not on a level of expertise with Moshe and Aharon. They could not remove the plagues, only attempt to imitate them. What was it that encouraged them to hold out so long, to deny that they were up against a force superior to theirs, to a Supreme Power which rendered them powerless? Horav Simcha Zissel, z.l., M’Kelm attributes this to human nature. If one were to place something sweet and tasty on his tongue and then be notified that this sweet food is poison, we would be hard-pressed to convince him otherwise. Likewise, if someone is under the impression that what he is doing is acceptable, one will have a difficult time impressing him with the truth. The Egyptian magicians wanted to believe and thus, they convinced themselves that their magical ability was greater than that of Moshe and Aharon. Nothing could convince them until the truth glared them in the face. They wanted so badly to undermine Moshe Rabbeinu that they would believe anything that would validate their own line of thinking.

Nachlas Tzvi cites the Ben Ish Chai, who relates the following story in one of his drashos, lectures. The famous city of Vilna was not always a city. Before it was founded, the ruling prince over the area called together his religious advisors and inquired of them whether he would be successful in building a city in this area. The pagan priests responded with a message from their gods: In order for the city to achieve success, it was necessary that a woman come forth of her own free will and offer her only son as a sacrifice to be buried alive. He would be the foundation stone of the city. This sacrifice would ensure a successful tenure for the municipality.

The prince immediately sent messengers throughout his provinces in search of such a woman, whose utter conviction would compel her to do the “right thing,” to bring her only son as a sacrifice for the “greater good” of the community. At first, they could not find anyone so devoted or so foolish. After a few days, however, a simple-minded woman, who lived in a small village far away came forward and offered the “services” of her only son, a young boy, only twelve-years- old. The prince and his advisors were ecstatic to hear that they would be able to proceed with dedicating the new city, now that their “sacrifice” had been located. They chose a day for the milestone event when the child would be buried alive, and the city would be founded. Everything was prepared. It would be a joyous occasion, a holiday for the entire population. Everyone, from the country’s nobility to the common citizen, gathered for this auspicious event and to witness a mother sacrificing her only son.

Just before the predetermined moment, the young boy asked to speak to the prince. His request was granted, and the boy came forward and said, “My prince, I cannot believe that our god is party

to such a terrible endeavor. Although your religious advisors claim that they saw this in a vision, I believe that they misunderstood what they saw. I, therefore, ask you to permit me to ask them three questions. If they answer correctly, I will concede to their wisdom and go to my death quietly and peacefully, for I will know that this is our god's will."

The prince immediately agreed. The boy thereupon turned to the advisors and asked, "What is the lightest thing on the earth? What is the sweetest thing in the world? What is the hardest thing of all?" The priests considered the questions. After a serious discussion, they responded unanimously, "The lightest thing is a feather; the sweetest thing is honey; the hardest thing is a stone." Then they looked at the assemblage, each with a victorious smile across his face.

The prince turned to the young boy and asked, "What do you say to their answers?" The boy responded with the sagacity of a scholar, "Your priests do not understand my questions. If they have no clue how to interpret the questions of a young boy, how can they be expected to even fathom what a god tells them? My prince, I am no fool. I would not ask a wise man a question which has an obvious answer. I was looking for the obscure, the answer which only an astute man with a penetrating mind can answer. Even a young child knows that a feather is light, honey is sweet and a stone is hard. By their very nature this is their characteristic. I am looking for the anomaly to the naked eye, which appears heavy, but is really light, seems bitter, but is actually sweet, seems soft, but is in reality very hard. I will now tell you the answers to my questions. The lightest thing in the world is an only child being carried by his mother. While he may seem heavy, for the mother he is no burden whatsoever. The sweetest thing in the world is a mother's milk to a nursing child. The hardest thing in the world is the heart of a mother who was prepared to sacrifice her only child."

The prince and all those assembled were astonished by the young boy's incisive mind. His penetrating wisdom mesmerized all those who had gathered to see him sacrificed. He clearly proved with his perceptive questions that the advice of the prince's advisors was utter nonsense. He demonstrated that a person, regardless of his ability and acumen, will see only what he wants to see. Objectivity can come only to those whose personal integrity is regulated and guided by yiraas Shomayim, fear of Heaven. Apparently, this was one virtue that Pharaoh's magicians did not possess.