

“You shall not turn from the word that they will tell you, right or left.” (17:11)

The spiritual leadership of Klal Yisrael makes their decision only after careful deliberation of the halachah, law. It is rendered by individuals whose relationship with Torah is of a singular nature. Their exemplary love for the Torah goes hand in hand with their profound scholarship. Their interpretation of the Torah is law. We are commanded to listen to them, even when the decision they render seems unjustified or incorrect. They represent the final word. To undermine the words of Chazal is to attack the Torah. The following incredible story was related by Horav David Puvarsky:

The story takes place in Russia where Horav Moshe Feinstein, z.l., was rav. In his city there lived a malshin, informer, who went out of his way to endear himself to the authorities at the expense of his Jewish brethren. As a result of his close relationship with the government, people were afraid of him, never knowing whether they would be his next sacrifice. Undoubtedly, he caused great difficulty and anxiety for the small Jewish community. People shied away from him, as they developed an intense hatred for him.

Everybody is destined to leave this temporary world at one time or another. The informer's turn had come to return his soul to his Maker. On the last day of his life, he asked the chevra kadisha, Jewish burial society, to come visit him, so that he could make one special request of them. When they arrived, the informer told them that he was acutely aware of the many sins that plagued his life. He fully understood the evil he had perpetrated and the terrible hurt he had caused to so many people. In his desire to expiate a malevolent life, he asked them to bury him in the ground in a fashion similar to that of a donkey – with his legs standing in a vertical position.

The men standing around the informer's bed were moved by the wicked man's plea. Thus, they gave him their word and afterward signed a document stating that they would accede to his request to be buried as a donkey.

After the informer died, word got back to the rav, Rav Moshe Feinstein, that they were about to bury a Jewish person in a manner antithetical to Torah dictate. Rav Moshe was vehement; he would not permit a Jew to be buried in such a denigrating manner.

As soon as he spoke, the people accepted his decision and buried the informer in the proper manner. The next morning, the secret police showed up immediately following the burial, demanding to have the corpse exhumed so that they could see in what manner the informer was buried. The chevra kadisha refused to exhume the body. They claimed it was against Jewish law to dig up a body. The police said that it was not their responsibility if the Torah law was being undermined or not. They wanted to view the body, and no one could prevent them from doing what they wanted to do.

The chevra kadisha saw that arguing with the police was to no avail. They had made up their mind to exhume the informer. They proceeded to dig up the grave. They peered inside, saw the manner in which the informer was buried and left peacefully. It was only then that the members of the chevra kadisha realized the incredible miracle that had just occurred for them. The reason that the police sought to search the burial site was because the informer had told his gentile friends that the Jews hated him, and they would surely bury him like a donkey. Even as he stood at his death's threshold, the miscreant attempted to take one last shot at his People. This person's self-hate prevailed over his sense of reason. He was willing to go to his death, to his eternal punishment, with one more sin on his record. Had he been buried in accordance with his wish, the entire Jewish community's lives would have been in danger. Such was his evil.

It was only the Daas Torah, the wisdom that is the result of being immersed in Torah that characterized Rav Moshe, that prevented a tragedy from occurring. This narrative is a tribute to the greatness in Torah that personified the individual who was the posek ha'dor, halachic arbiter, whose decisions encompassed and addressed every area of human endeavor. We also note the evil that permeates some people. The informer knew he was dying. Rather than repent, he was determined to make one more attempt to hurt the People from whom he had become estranged. While condemning this person is easy, we might want to ask ourselves what could have happened in his life that prompted such virulent hatred towards his People?