

A G-d of faithfulness without injustices; He is righteous and upright. (32:4)

Our inability to see beyond the parameters of our eyesight is the reason that people have questions concerning the manner in which Hashem guides the world. As human beings we have limited eyesight, and, our ability to understand His ways is, likewise, stunted. We understand neither why bad things happen to good people, nor who really is good and who is not. For that matter, can we really define good things? The following story regarding the birth of *Rav Aharon Karliner, zl*, founder of the Karlin-Stolin dynasty, should engender a good feeling within us, especially on this, the first *Shabbos* of the year, when our fate for the coming year is before the Heavenly Tribunal.

Rav Yaakov and his wife, *Perel*, of Pinsk, Poland, had not yet been blessed with children. Hearing of the great *Baal Shem Tov*, and his ability to be the catalyst for miracles, motivated *Perel* to travel to the holy man and entreat his blessing. She poured out her heart to him, and she received his blessing. The next year, she was holding her own son in her arms. Words cannot describe the joy that permeated their home. Sadly, it was cut short when, two years later, shortly after taking their son for his first visit to the *Baal Shem Tov*, the child died. After the mourning period was complete, they returned broken-hearted to the *Baal Shem Tov* in search of an explanation.

When they entered his room, he was engrossed in deep thought. He looked up at them and said, "Let me tell you a story. A powerful king had everything a person could want, but one thing: he had no children. After visiting the greatest doctor of his time, with all the same results- no luck- he decided to turn to the nation that understands that everything in life is actually a miracle from G-d: the Jewish People. He called in the leaders of the Jewish community and put it to them very bluntly: They would either pray for him to have a child, or they would all be expelled from the country.

"The Jews were used to impossible demands. This was, however, an ultimatum they could not negotiate. They turned to Hashem and did what they did best: *daven*. The prayers had their desired effect. Hashem now needed a "volunteer" from the world of the *neshamos* to be willing to descend to this world and allow his soul to live within the body of a gentile. One holy soul came forward. "If it means saving an entire Jewish community – I will do it!" the *neshamah* declared.

"The joy throughout the king's palace extended throughout the country. The Jews enjoyed tremendous respect and favor. The young prince was a brilliant child, soon there was no one who could teach him. The king brought his son to the pope and asked him to see to his son's education personally. One does not argue with the king. The Pope now had a new student. The boy absorbed whatever he was taught – on both secular and religious bases. He was allowed full reign over the papal palace. There was one restriction, however: one room was sealed every day for two hours; no one was allowed entrance. This piqued the prince's curiosity. One day, he figured out how to enter the room – which he did.

“How shocked he was to discover the Pope wearing *tallis* and *tefillin*! At first, he lost his breath and could find no words to express himself. The prince then expressed his inner joy, explaining to the Pope that, although he did not know why, he had a serious gravitational pull towards Judaism. He wanted to convert, so that he could live and die as a Jew. When the Pope realized that there stood before him no simple soul, he facilitated his escape. The boy found a community whose *rav* studied with him, and he converted to Judaism.”

The *Baal Shem Tov* continued: “Years went by, and the child, now a man, went the way of the world. Upon passing, his soul came before Hashem and asked for entrance into *Gan Eden*. He had successfully completed his mission. As Hashem was about to grant his request, the prosecuting angel came forward and accused, ‘What about those years he lived as a pagan, as a prince in the king’s palace?’ It was a strong indictment which could not be placated. Hashem responded with a decree that this pure, holy soul descend to this world and live a pure life for two years. That *neshamah* was the *neshamah* of your baby. It was not decreed for you to have children. Through your prayers you were granted this special gift.” The parents were assuaged, but questioned if they had done enough to raise their child. The *Baal Shem Tov* instructed them to recite *amein* with children in *shul* and hand out sweets to the children. Shortly thereafter, they were blessed with a special child whom they named Aharon. He was the holy founder of the Karlin/Stolin dynasty. Once again, we see that things are not always as they appear.