

Whoever among the servants of Pharaoh feared the word of Hashem chased his servants and his livestock to the houses. (9:20)

What is the meaning of *avdei Pharaoh*, the servants of Pharaoh? What about the citizens of Egypt? What did they do? The **Meshech Chochmah** explains that, when word went out from Moshe *Rabbeinu* that all Egyptians should take their animals inside, the immediate reaction was to comply. After all, Moshe seemed to have a powerful track record. It would be suicide to defy his warning. Pharaoh, however, would not allow his people to cave in to Moshe. He dispatched his servants throughout the land with an order to actively disregard Moshe's warning. The Egyptian citizen was now in a quandary: To whom should he listen – Moshe, or Pharaoh's servants?

The fear which gripped the Egyptians was now doubled. If they left their animals outdoors, the animals might die. On the other hand, if they brought the animals inside, they might die. Those G-d-fearing Egyptians who listened to Moshe – the *yarei es dvar Hashem mei'avdei Pharaoh*, who feared Hashem more than they feared the servants of Pharaoh – took their animals in. They made the wise choice.

When we consider that this was not the first *makah*, plague, to strike Egypt – and that each one was devastating – one begins to wonder at the utter foolishness of those Egyptians who did not seem to care. They had seen the miracles. How could they be so dense, to disregard the past as if it had never occurred? Apparently, this is human nature. How often do we perceive overt miracles and occurrences which are clearly supernatural, yet go on with business as usual? It is only when we are personally affected, when we personally experience a miracle, that we lift up our heads and pay attention.

The *Mashgiach* of *Kol Torah*, *Horav Yitzchak Yeruchem Bordyanski*, related the following telling story. The *Mashgiach* had occasion to take a *monit*, taxi, to a student's wedding. Accompanying him were three students of the *yeshivah*. The *nahag*, driver, who apparently was friendly with the *Mashgiach*, asked for a *dvar Torah*. This must have been their usual exchange, with the *Mashgiach* sharing a Torah insight with this otherwise yet-to-be-observant Jew. This time, however, the *Mashgiach* countered, "I am the one who always says the *dvar Torah*, while you listen. This time we will exchange our roles. I will listen, while you will say a *dvar Torah*."

"Fine," began the driver. "I have an inspiring story to relate. When I was in the army, training to become a paratrooper, I once had to endure a difficult day of training. Our entire group was taken to a desolate spot in the wilderness and told to bed down for the night. We were all exhausted and could not wait to go to sleep – even in the miserable wilderness. A few minutes after we lay down and immediately floated into an exhausted sleep, we were awakened to terrible screaming. We immediately jumped up to see the cause of the screams. We looked around to see that one of the soldiers lay with a poisonous snake coiled around his leg.

"The soldier knew that the slightest movement on his part would cause the snake to attack, and his life would be over. He lay there without moving, begging us for assistance. 'Please do something,' he cried out. Regrettably, there was nothing any of us could do to help him.

"In a last-ditch attempt to save the soldier, the commander called over one of the sharpshooters, a marksman of exemplary ability, and instructed him to take careful aim and shoot the snake. The marksman replied somewhat nervously, 'But the snake is coiled around his leg. If I miss, or if it does not die immediately, it will react and bite the soldier!' The commander replied that there was no other alternative. Otherwise, the soldier would certainly die.

"The marksman lined up his rifle, carefully adjusting the sight, checking the wind, and was about to take aim and shoot, when a *chareidi*, observant, soldier called out, 'Stop! Before you shoot, try one alternative gesture.' He looked at the soldier lying on the ground, white as a sheet, with sweat pouring down his face, and said, 'Recite *Shema Yisrael*. It will protect you.'

"He had nothing to lose, so he began saying the age-old words from the Torah. Word-by-word came out of his mouth, very slowly and clearly. He then repeated it. Suddenly, to our astonishment, we saw the snake slowly begin to uncoil itself from the soldier's leg and crawl away.

"This was a miracle experienced by each one of us. We all saw it. There was no doubt that G-d had listened to the prayer and intervened."

The driver concluded the story and was silent, prompting the *Mashgiach* to ask, "What was the conclusion of the story?"

The driver replied, "The soldier who was saved took it as a sign from Heaven. He changed his life and is now *dati*, fully observant, and studies Torah."

Hearing this, the *Mashgiach* asked the driver, "What about you, my friend? Did you change as a result of this overt miracle?"

"*Rebbe*, I have not changed. You see, the snake did not coil itself around my leg."

Herein lies the difference between a wise man – a perceptive person – and a fool. The fool waits for the snake to coil itself around his leg. The wise man, however, suffices with a perceptive lesson from others. He would much rather remain an innocent observer. Another powerful lesson can be derived from the Torah's characterization of the G-d-fearing Egyptian: *yarei es dvar Hashem*; "he feared the word of G-d." Did it require a rocket scientist to believe in Hashem? One *makah* after another struck the land of Egypt. What more did this G-d-fearing Egyptian require to infuse him with the fear of Heaven? How could they not fear Hashem? We see clearly, comments **Horav Yeruchem Levovitz, zl**, that it is quite simple for one to become a *yarei Shomayim*. It does not take much. Indeed, if one believes because he is up against the proverbial wall, with no way out,

and the chips are all stacked against him – and he believes in Hashem, which is a no-brainer – he is still considered a *yarei Shomayim*! How easy it really is; yet, how difficult it apparently must be to so many who talk the talk, but are ill-prepared to assume the duty of becoming a true G-d-fearing person.

Veritably, if it were so simple, why did those Egyptians refuse to listen – at a danger to their servants and animals? How could they ignore something that was clearly going to occur? Rav Yeruchem quotes **Horav Yisrael Salanter, zl**, who applied a powerful analogy to explain how a person could possibly ignore Hashem. He suggested the following: A person chances upon a glass of water which seems untouched. It appears pristine. There is no reason for him not to drink it. In fact, a number of intelligent people who are in the area where the glass of water is located all attest to its purity. As he is about to drink the water, a man saunters over and claims that the water has been poisoned! This man has a long history of emotional problems. Indeed, the last few weeks he had been acting even more irrationally than ever before. Chances are that this person had conjured up in his own deviated mind that the water had been poisoned. Yet, will anyone in his right mind drink the water? Absolutely not! If there is even a remote possibility that the water is poisonous, no intelligent person would drink from it.

With this idea in mind, Rav Yisrael wonders how any rational person could go through life and not be afraid that, perhaps, he will ultimately be punished for his evil. How could one blatantly transgress Hashem's command when there is a "remote" possibility that he will be punished for his misdeeds? Even if there is a "slight" chance that Torah Judaism is the only way of life to which a Jew should adhere, and one who does not observe will pay dearly for his decision, it would make sense that any Jew with a modicum of intelligence would be observant. Yet, it is clearly not the case.

The fear of G-d manifest by the Egyptians was elementary in nature. It was the simplest form of fear. Yet, they were called *yarei Hashem*. This supports the notion that *yiraas Shomayim* takes intelligence. On the other hand, the criteria for the one who did not fear Hashem was *lo sam libo*, "And he who did not apply (the lessons) to his heart." He did not take the miracle seriously. The lessons did not catalyze his asking: What should I do? How should I react? No, he ignored the miracles and continued along his merry path of iniquity, with business as usual. In order to be a *yarei Shomayim*, one has only to look, acknowledge and relate to his heart. If one closes his eyes and refuses to see, it is no wonder that the greatest miracles leave him unmoved.