

Lest the beasts of the field increase against you. (7:22)

Rashi comments that Moshe *Rabbeinu* was well aware that a Jew's righteousness protects him from wild beasts. One who is close with Hashem has nothing to fear from wild animals. Moshe was also very much aware that, realistically, the Jews would eventually fall short of this sublime level of virtue. The *Talmud* (*Shabbos* 151b) states that a wild beast has no jurisdiction over (cannot harm) a person until that individual appears (to the wild beast) to be just another animal. (When a person taints his *Tzelem Elokim*, Divine Image, due to a lack of righteousness, then the wild beast sees before him nothing more than another creature.)

In one of his more famous insights, the *Ohr HaChaim HaKadosh* (in his commentary to *Sefer Bereishis*) applies this concept to the scenario in which Reuven was going to save Yosef *HaTzaddik*. The brothers believed that Yosef deserved to be executed for his crimes against them. Reuven "saved him from their hands" by persuading them to throw him into a pit which was filled with scorpions and snakes. "How is this called saving?" asks the *Ohr HaChaim*. He explains that human beings are blessed with *bechirah*, freedom of choice, and are thus able to kill someone – even if the person has not been designated by Heaven to warrant the death penalty. In other words, if the brothers had taken Yosef's life, it would still not be an indication that he deserved execution. If, however, Yosef were to be killed by wild animals, it would be proof that he deserved this punishment, because an animal has no *bechirah*. [We must add that an animal will not kill a man as long as the man manifests to the animal that he is different than the animal; he is a human being. If an animal kills a human, it is because the human being has lost it; he is viewed by the animal as another animal – albeit in a different form. Yosef was not killed by the animals because he was a *tzaddik*; thus, he would not be harmed. He would not have fared so well had he not been thrown into the pit.]

There is a well-known story that accompanies this *dvar Torah*. When the *Ohr HaChaim* moved back to his birthplace, Sale, Morocco, he became a goldsmith, earning his living by making gold threads that were woven into material for garments. Obviously, his clientele was comprised of wealthy individuals who did not spar over price. His custom was to work until he had earned enough to live. Once he covered his month's expenses, he closed up his shop and reverted to his Torah learning.

Understandably, when the ruler of the kingdom required a gold-braided garment "yesterday," there was no room for refusal – unless one was the *Ohr HaChaim*. This was the case when the governor of Sale was marrying off his daughter. His entire royal family purchased expensive clothing and sent them to the *Ohr HaChaim* to weave gold threads into the material. The *Ohr HaChaim* thanked the governor for thinking of him, but, nonetheless, demurred from accepting the job. Apparently, the following month's expenses were already covered, and he would work no more that month. The governor had little tolerance for obstinacy – especially if it came from a Jew – and he very sternly intimated to the *Ohr HaChaim* that "no" was an unacceptable response. The *Ohr HaChaim* stood his ground and said "no" would have to be acceptable, since he was not giving up his Torah

learning for money. The governor considered the refusal of the *Ohr HaChaim* to be a personal insult, and he took steps to avenge his humiliation.

The governor kept lions in a cage in his palace. These were ferocious beasts who were present for the governor's pleasure. It goes without saying that one who has such ferocious animals as pets is obviously a cruel person. The governor fit this description. He proved it when he instructed his keeper to starve the lions. He then dispatched his guards to bring the *Ohr HaChaim* to the palace in order to throw him to the lions. He would, once and for all, teach this obstinate Jew that one does not say "no" to the governor.

The *Ohr HaChaim* was flung into the lion's den, where he proceeded to sit down among the lions and recite *Tehillim*. The starving lions sat around him, ignoring their hunger and the "food" that was before them. The *Ohr HaChaim* had written that a wild animal kills a human being only if Heaven had sentenced the human being to die. No such decree had been issued against the *Ohr HaChaim*.

The governor now had the fear of G-d course through him. He realized that before him sat a very holy man. He removed the *Ohr HaChaim* from the cage, begged his forgiveness and allowed him to return to his Torah study.