

"Stretch out your hand toward Heaven, and there shall be darkness over the land of Egypt." (10:21)

Hashem commanded Moshe to stretch out his hand towards the heavens in order to create a thick darkness over the land of Egypt. This plague lasted for three days, during which time people were unable to move about and were unable to see anything. *Rashi* cites *Chazal* who explain that in addition to punishing the Egyptian people, this plague also served a practical purpose. There were *reshaim*, wicked Jews, who refused to leave Egypt. These evil Jews perished during the three days of *makas choshech*, so that the Egyptian populace would not see Jews dying and say, "They are also being punished as we are."

Chazal's choice of the words *reshaim*, wicked people to define Jews who refused to leave Egypt seems a bit harsh. Should someone who wishes to remain a slave in a paganistic society obsessed with decadence and immorality be described as a *rasha*? He is obviously a fool, but why view him as evil? Imagine going to the federal penitentiary for hardened criminals and offering amnesty to an inmate in the most depraved area of the institution. He would run from there at the first opportunity! If not, he would be a fool, but definitely not evil!

Apparently, *Chazal* have a different perspective on freedom and a Jew's obligation to free himself from every form of human bondage. This concept is truly a Jewish one. Any other culture would depict an individual who seeks to remain in slavery as foolish. Judaism, however, views one who wishes to remain a slave in a depraved, immoral environment as evil. For a Jew to be free is not an opportunity; it is an inherent obligation. The imperative for freedom is part of *kedushas Yisrael*, the sacredness of Judaism. Just as it is prohibited to hurt oneself physically, it is similarly forbidden to inflict harm on one's spiritual persona. A Jew who is a slave in Egypt is vulnerable to the influences of the most degenerate and corrupt society, which would be likely to obstruct his spiritual development.

Furthermore, Jews who refused to leave Egypt clearly perceived themselves as primarily Egyptians, not Jews! They thought they were native citizens, just like everyone else. Alas, history has taught us the futility of such an observation. In the eyes of the Egyptians, assimilated Jews were nothing more than Jews who are not part of their society. We witnessed this phenomenon in Berlin. Those Jews who had attempted to "cleanse" themselves of the "taint" of Jewishness, who had publicly decried their Jewish heritage while seeking to be accepted as Germans, were looked down upon by the German people with contempt. In their minds, they thought they were Germans, but in German minds they remained Jews!

Being a part of the *Am Ha'Nivchar*, chosen nation, requires a certain inherent distinctiveness. This uniqueness should be a source of pride for every Jew. To deny one's affiliation with *Am Yisrael* is to denigrate one's greatest G-d-given gift. How regrettable it is when the gentile must remind the Jew of his heritage.