

Reuven heard and he rescued him from their hand. (37:21)

Reuven suggested the brothers throw Yosef into a pit, rather than personally execute corporeal punishment against him. [The *Shevatim*, tribes/brothers, convened a *bais din*, judicial court, to determine if Yosef was, in fact, guilty of rendering false testimony against them, or a *rodef*, pursuer, who wanted to do them harm. In any event, they did not make their decision lightly.] It is difficult to understand how Reuven's suggestion that the brothers instead fling Yosef into a pit swarming with dangerous creatures was an act of saving Yosef. Was he not selecting one form of death over another? The *Ohr HaChaim HaKadosh* explains that Reuven's intention to have Yosef placed in a pit with deadly creatures was to save him – if he was worthy. A man has free will, thus enabling him to take someone's life even if the victim had not been Heavenly sentenced to death. Wild animals are Heavenly-controlled. In this regard, they will not harm a human being unless Hashem has sentenced him to death. Thus, *va'yatzileihu mi'yadam*; "He rescued him from their hands," meaning: he saved him from the hand of a human being, who possesses free choice.

Ohr HaChaim's position vis-à-vis human free will – and its impact on another human being – is novel. Other commentators appear to disagree, maintaining that no human can harm another unless Heaven has specifically decreed it. Veritably, our core beliefs are founded upon the principle of Divine Providence, which teaches that Hashem guides everything in this world. As such, no one can harm his fellow unless Hashem is in agreement.

Horav Chaim Kanievsky, zl, sheds light on the *Ohr HaChaim's* statement. Hashem created the world for the purpose of giving man free-will to choose between good and evil. Thus, when one chooses evil by intending to harm his fellow, to countermand his intention by miraculously saving the victim means going against a principle of Creation. The victim certainly wants to live; the murderer wants to change his status. Who wins out, without negating the assailant's free-will? Such a miracle requires that the intended victim possess enormous merit, such that it will supersede the aggressor's free-will.

When we have the merit of the victim up against the free-will of the murderer, the victim requires a greater accumulation of merit than he would if he were facing off with deadly creatures, who have no free-will. Reuven conjectured that Yosef was sufficiently righteous to merit being saved from the creatures – but not so when he must contend with the brothers. He was certain that, unless Heaven issued a decree that Yosef should die, he would survive the pit. He was not prepared to assert that Yosef's merits could save him from human hands who possess free-will. Therefore, their decision to kill Yosef was inequitable.

The *Ohr HaChaim's* position that an animal cannot harm a human unless Heaven has so decreed, came into play in his own life. *Horav Chaim Ibn Attar, zl*, the *Ohr HaChaim*, made Torah study his primary vocation. He spent day and night poring over the tomes of *Talmud* and *Shulchan Aruch*. Refusing to be supported by the community, he opted to open a small silver shop and use his extraordinary craftsmanship to fashion beautiful pieces of jewelry and trinkets. His fame spread

throughout Morocco. He had one stipulation. He worked until he had sufficient funds with which to support his family. He then shuttered his shop and returned to his Torah study. When the funds ran out, he returned to the shop.

One day, two emissaries from the king of Morocco presented themselves at his shop with a message from the king. He had gold which he wanted him to fashion into a beautiful jewelry piece in honor of his daughter's upcoming wedding. *Rav Chaim* apologized that he could be of no assistance. His shop was closed. He had earned enough money to retire to his beloved Torah study. They looked at him incredulously. How dare he say "no" to the king? He replied that he had priorities, and Torah had supremacy over everything. The two men returned to the king in a state of shock. This had never happened before. No one had ever manifest such audacity. The king was angry to hear of the *Ohr HaChaim's* refusal, but decided to forgo his feelings this one time and give the Jewish silversmith another chance. To his chagrin, the negative response had not changed. "No" remained "no." To defy the king twice was high treason, which warranted the death penalty. Since the silversmith had made a fool of the king, the execution would be especially painful and gruesome. He would be thrown into a cage with three hungry lions. In short time, he would satisfy their hunger. *Rav Chaim* took the decree with total equanimity, and even refused to share it with his family. He bid them goodbye and said he would return later. He made one request of the soldiers: He would like to take his *Tallis*, *Tefillin* and *Sefer Tehillim* along with him. They scoffed at him, but agreed, knowing that within minutes he would be devoured.

Bedecked in *Tallis* and *tefillin* and reciting *Tehillim* in a loud voice, *Rav Chaim* was led into the cage. A short time passed, and, when the guards heard no screams, they went to see what was occurring. How shocked they were to discover the *Ohr HaChaim* sitting in middle of the cage reciting *Tehillim*. The three lions sat at his feet entranced, listening to his prayers. When the king was informed of the developments, he raged in disbelief. He was going to the lion's den to see with his own two eyes the spectacle that was taking place. At first, he blamed the lion keeper for having fed the lions a large meal. Thus, they were not hungry for human flesh. The lion keeper denied any wrongdoing. To prove his innocence, he hung a piece of meat from a pole which he passed through the bars of the cage. The lions proceeded to devour it fiercely. Clearly, something was special about the holy rabbi. Seeing this entire scene, the king declared, "Now I know that there is a G-d of *Yisrael!*" He had *Rav Chaim* removed from the cage and asked for his forgiveness. As penance, the king showered him with gifts and great honor. When he returned home and his wife asked him about his day, he replied, "*Baruch Hashem*. But I see now that the time has come for us to move to *Eretz Yisrael*. Conditions here do not provide the proper climate for Torah study."

While variations to this story exist, the message remains the same: animals have no power over a human being unless Hashem wills it to be so.