



Upon his arrival in Petersburg, R' Yosef Yitzchok learned that the decree had already reached the desk of Stalinin, the feared and hated interior minister of Russia and arguably the most powerful man in the Russian Empire. The ruling Czar's lack of decisiveness made him a virtual rubber stamp for whichever minister the prevailing political climate favored; at that particular time, the Czar was led by the nose by Interior Minister Stalinin, a heartless tyrant and rabid Anti-Semite who was personally responsible for many of the devastating pogroms which were "arranged" for the Jews of Russia.

Living in Petersburg was an elderly non-Jewish scholar, a former teacher and mentor of Stalinin. R' Yosef Yitzchok succeeded in befriending this man, who was greatly impressed by the scope and depth of the young *chasid's* knowledge. For many an evening the two would sit and talk in the old man's study.

One day, R' Yosef Yitzchok told his new friend the purpose of his stay in Petersburg and pleaded with him to assist him in reaching the Interior Minister. The old scholar replied, "To speak with him would be useless. The man has a cruel and malicious heart, and I have already severed all contact with this vile creature many years ago. But there is one thing I can do for you. Because of my status as Stalinin's mentor, I have been granted a permanent entry pass into the interior ministry building. I can 'lend' you my pass for a short time, but I need not explain to you the consequences, for both of us, if you are found out. It is only because I have come to respect you and what you stand for, that I have decided to help you."

When R' Yosef Yitzchok presented the pass at the interior ministry, the guard on duty was stupefied: few were the cabinet-level ministers granted such a privilege, and here stands a young Jew, complete with beard, sidelocks, chassidic garb and Yiddish accent, at a time when to even reside in Petersburg was forbidden to Jews. But the pass was in order, so he waved him through.

R' Yosef Yitzchok entered the building and proceeded stealthily to look for Stalinin's office. He thought if he could get just a few words with the man, he may just succeed. Those whom he passed could only stare at the strange apparition confidently striding the corridors of the interior ministry. After much effort, he located the minister's office at the far end of a commanding hallway on the fourth floor of the building.

As R' Yosef Yitzchok walked toward the office, the door opened and Stalinin himself walked out and closed the door behind him. The future *Rebbe* and the hated interior minister passed within a few feet of each other. R' Yosef Yitzchok made straight for the office, opened the door, and walked in.

After a quick search of the office, R' Yosef Yitzchok located the documents pertaining to the decree sitting right in Stalinin's desk. On the desk sat two rubber ink stamps, bearing the Russian words 'APPROVED' or 'REJECTED' above the minister's signature and seal. Quickly, R' Yosef Yitzchok stamped the proposed decree 'REJECTED' and inserted the papers into a pile of vetoed documents which sat in a tray on the desk. He then left the room, closed the door behind him, and walked out of the building. Mission accomplished!

## משל למח הדבר רומה

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ותהי הכנס באדם ובבהמה. ויאמרו החרטמים אצבע אלקים היאוכו' (ח-יד, טו)

**משל:** The *gemara* (גיטין נ:י) relates the following incident: After the wicked Roman general (later emperor) Titus burned the second *Beis Hamikdash*, he mockingly sneered, "Where is their G-d?" On his way back to Rome, a whirlpool threatened to overturn and sink his ship. He again mocked *Hashem* claiming that He only has the power to punish people through water. "If *Hashem* is truly strong, let Him come onto dry land and fight me there!"

A Heavenly voice rang out. "You wicked son of a wicked man! I have a tiny creature in this world called a mosquito. It will fight you on dry land."

When Titus' ship landed in Rome, *Hashem* caused

a mosquito to fly into his nose. It flew around inside of him and drove him to the brink of madness. Then, it penetrated his brain and finally killed him.

**נמשל:** Pharaoh also mocked *Hashem* by asking, "Who is *Hashem* that I should heed His voice?" *Hashem* gave him the same answer he gave Titus: "I have small creatures on dry land called lice. Go and fight with them!" *Hashem* first struck Egypt with plagues of blood and frogs but when Pharaoh continued to mock and say that *Hashem* is only powerful with water, He sent the lice - tiny creatures whose origin is totally on land. It was then that the Egyptian sorcerers said, "It is the finger of the Lord." (ראשית ביכורים)

ויאמר ה' אל משה אמר אל אחרן קח מטף ונטה ירך על מימי מצרים (ט-י)

## TORAH GEMS

ויהי ברד ואש מתלקחת בתוך הברד כבוד מאד אשר לא היה כמותו (ט-כד)

"Why were the water and sand struck by Aharon? *Rabi Tanchum says: The Holy One blessed be He, told Moshe, 'It is not proper that you strike the waters that saved you when you were thrown into the river, or the sand that protected you when you killed the Egyptian.'*" (**Medrash Tanchuma**) The transformation of the river to blood and the sand to lice contributed to demonstrating *Hashem's* greatness, and to encourage *Bnei Yisroel* to believe in Him. But these miracles also contributed to strengthening in Moshe his trait of gratitude. Thus, when *Hashem* said to Moshe, "And now, go and I will dispatch you to Pharaoh," Moshe replied, "Master of the Universe, I cannot go. Yisro opened up his home to me. He considers me as his son. I cannot show myself to be ungrateful." How could Moshe, on whom depended the deliverance of *Bnei Yisroel* from Egypt, receiving the *Torah*, and entry into the Holy Land; how could he refuse this Divine mission simply to avoid seeming ungrateful?

It is because one who shows himself ungrateful ends up renouncing the existence of *Hashem* Himself. Explains **R' Dovid Pinto Shlit'a**, this is what Moshe feared. What would his mission have been worth if he had not shown his gratitude to Yisro, a man who not only opened his home to him, but also gave him his daughter in marriage? What kind of example would he have set in his role as leader? A man must always show gratitude to his neighbor, friend or family member for *הטוב* is an expansive trait. If a person becomes accustomed to not looking down upon G-d's creation, he will then respect man, who is made in His image, and will end up not disparaging the benefits that the *Ribono Shel Olam* Himself bestows.

## מעשה אבות ... סימן לבנים

והפליתי ביום ההוא את ארץ גושן .... למען תדע כי אני ה' בקרב הארץ וגו' (ח-יח)

As *Hashem* continued to heap plague after plague upon the hapless Egyptians, He made sure that it was abundantly clear just who was sending these miraculous signs: "Although my Divine Presence is in the Heavens, My decrees are upheld in the lower realms" - My decrees, said *Hashem*, not Pharaoh's.

Many stories are told of the great effort and *Mesiras Nefesh* of the previous **Lubavitcher Rebbe, R' Yosef Yitzchok Schneerson ZT"L**, on behalf of the Jews of Russia during the time when the Czarist regime still ruled the Russian Empire. One incident, though, stands out. A new decree against the Jewish community was in the works, aimed at forcing changes in the structure of the rabbinate and Jewish education. R' Yosef Yitzchok, then a young man, was dispatched by his father, the previous *Rebbe, R' Sholom Dov ZT"L*, to the Russian capital of Petersburg to see what he could do to prevent the decree from being enacted.

*Chazal* teach us that *Hashem* struck the Egyptians with Ten Plagues, while at the same time bringing healing to *Bnei Yisroel*, supplying "medicine for the soul" by teaching them important lessons in faith. צפרדע (Frogs) taught them that sometimes a person must even give up his life to fulfill *Hashem's* command if necessary (פסחים נ:י). From ערוב (Wild Beasts), they saw *Hashem's* hand in conducting the affairs of the world, punishing the wicked and protecting the righteous, for only the Egyptians were affected by the plague, and not *Bnei Yisroel*. This lesson was made even clearer when דבר (Pestilence) struck, for although it was a contagious disease, it did not spread from the Egyptians' cattle to that of the Jews.

What moral could be derived from מכת ברד (Plague of Hail)? **R' Moshe Feinstein ZT"L** bases his answer on the *gemara* (קידושין פא.) which compares the *yetzer hara* to a pillar of fire trapped inside the human body of flesh and blood. Man's mission is to bring that fire under control and not allow it to "consume" him by dominating his life. This quality was exhibited by the hail as well. *Chazal* tell us that the Plague of Hail consisted of fire intermingled with hailstones. The water of the hail did not extinguish the fire, and the fire did not melt the hailstones; these two disparate forces worked together to fulfill *Hashem's* command.

From this unique plague we learn that man cannot excuse sinful behavior by claiming that it was impossible for him to overcome the "fire" that burned within him, that his behavior was merely dictated by human nature. The hail showed the Jews that the fire of the *yetzer hara* can indeed be subdued, if one is only willing to put in the necessary effort to do so.