

Dear Community,

when we read about the various plagues that G-d sent onto Egypt, our primary takeaway is a gratitude for the miracles G-d sent to enable our exodus, tempered by a grim regret for the suffering of the Egyptian people. Indeed, while we discuss the plagues at our Seder table, a place of joy and celebration, we spill wine, long the substance symbolizing joy, from our goblets. We appreciate our time of triumph, but we are not blind to its costs.

However, the Talmud tells us of a far more consequential conclusion drawn from the seemingly benign plague of frogs. During the exile between the two temples, Nebuchadnezzar built a large sculpture of himself and demanded that the populous prostrate themselves to it. Three Jews, Chananya, Mishael and Azarya debated amongst themselves if this was something worth sacrificing their lives for. The Talmud writes that they drew inspiration from the actions of the frogs in Egypt who jumped into the flames to be baked in the bread and food of the Egyptians. This act of self-sacrifice convinced them that they should give up their lives for the sake of G-d's name.

This passage of Talmud is difficult to understand for a few reasons. First of all, if the statue of Nebuchadnezzar was an idol from a halachic perspective, everyone had an obligation to face death rather than bow down, as the sin of idol worship is one of the three cardinal sins. If it was solely a vanity object and exercise, why would they be allowed to condemn themselves to death? Second of all, what lessons can be drawn from those frogs? Animals, governed by instinct and devoid of free-will, have no prerogative to decide if this was what they wanted to do or not. Humans face the challenge and responsibility of choice, so what conclusions can be drawn from frogs following orders?

The answer, based on various different commentaries, is that the statue of Nebuchadnezzar was not an idol, but it was a statement of absolute power and the commandment to bow a demand for absolute fealty. The underlying statement behind this decree was antithetical to the belief of G-d's rule and presence in our world. Even though halachically this was not idol worship as there were no claims made of Nebuchadnezzar's divinity, allowing this rejection of G-d's place in our lives required a stand. However, this was not an action demanded of all the Jews since even a couple of people making the ultimate sacrifice would send the message that Nebuchadnezzar, while powerful, was not the supreme ruler that he saw himself to be.

Now the Jews were faced with the following dilemma; each one can say that some else can do this act of sacrifice, why should they risk their lives. In social psychology, this is often referred to as the Kitty Genovese effect, a 1960's tragedy involving a young woman's murder within earshot of over dozens of neighbors. Nobody moved to help her, assuming that someone else would do it. Indeed, we all have a mitzvah to preserve our own lives, how do we have the right to make the choice to be the one who throws it away?

This was the lesson that Chananya, Mishael, and Azarya learned from the frogs. G-d willed that the frogs invade Egypt. Some were to go into the beds or the clothing or the pools, but some had to die in the fires of the Egyptian stoves. There were plenty of pleasant assignments the baked frogs could have chosen, but since this was G-d's will, they leaped into the flames. Yes, they did not have free will - they are governed by complete fealty to the Creator who willed their fate. However, as the Talmud tells us (Eruvin, 100a), we can learn lessons for our own behavior from the qualities of animals. The acts of sacrifice of these frogs, regardless of their lack of autonomy, is a lesson for us learn.

What was this lesson? What did the frogs teach Chananya, Mishael and Azarya? What do the frogs teach us? The lesson is that when something needs to be done that is unpleasant, we are very content to allow others to take the initiative. Someone needed to take on Nebuchadnezzar and make the statement about the primacy of G-d's dominion, but who should do it? The frogs did not ask, hesitate, moralize or deliberate: they jumped and sanctified G-d's name. So those three Jews took this lesson of taking the initiative for those unpleasant tasks and doing what needs to be done.

This is our lesson. When things need to be done in our micro or global community, are we jumping? Are we taking responsibility for those things that are not the most enjoyable? Do we expect others to do all those things that we don't want to do, while we offer our help when it strikes our fancy? Is the Kitty Genovese bystander effect deadening our drive and compassion? May we all find the leader in all of us and be ready to take initiative to change our communities and our world.

Good Shabbos,
Shlomo Agishtein