

THE PUNISHMENT FOR THEFT

by Rabbi Daniel Travis

All flesh that walked the earth perished. (Bereshith 7:21)

In some cases, if someone died owing money to others, whether because he had stolen or for other reasons, his soul must return to this world.⁽¹⁾ However, he will not return to the world as a human being, but as a horse, and he will have to toil for years before he will be pardoned for the money he owes.⁽²⁾

Rav Meir of Premishlan once stayed at the home of a man who owned many horses. Rav Meir asked his host if he would be willing to sell him one of the horses. The host explained that he could not sell the specific horse Rav Meir had chosen for it was his finest horse. A short while later, Rav Meir asked his host if he had any debtors' notes. The host showed Rav Meir his collection of notes, and when Rav Meir looked through them, he picked out one and inquired about it. The host told him that the man who signed that note as a debtor had passed away, and there was no one from whom to collect the money. That being the case, Rav Meir asked if he could keep the note, and his host agreed. Rav Meir then ripped the note to pieces.

Immediately, one of the servants was heard shouting that the master's finest horse had died suddenly, just at that moment. The host was shaken by this bizarre scenario, and asked Rav Meir the meaning of all that had transpired. Rav Meir explained that the individual whose note he had destroyed had been sent back to the world in the form of a horse in order to compensate the host for the money he had never repaid him. When the host gave Rav Meir the note, the debt was effectively cancelled, and the soul of this individual was freed to leave this world and enter the World to Come in peace.⁽³⁾

1. *Vilna Gaon, Commentary on Mishlei 14:25.*

2. Chofetz Chaim, Sefath Tamim, Ch. 4.

3. Beith Yisrael Ch. 8 p. 117.