

# THOSE WHO KNOW

*by Rabbi Label Lam*

*And when it will be that Pharaoh will call you and say, "What is your occupation?" You are to say that your servants have been cattlemen from our youth and until now, both we and our forefathers, in order that he should be able to settle you in the land of Goshen since all shepherds are abhorrent to Egyptians. (Breishis 46:33-34)*

All shepherds are abhorrent to Egyptians: Because they are to them as gods! (Rashi)

What was the wisdom in Joseph coaching his family to declare themselves as career shepherds? The Sifse' Chachamim offers two different approaches to Rashi's explanation as to why the Egyptians are inclined to abhor shepherds. 1) The Egyptians know that these creatures that they hold in such high esteem and promote as gods are worthless and therefore due to their own shame they tend to hate those who have familiarity with the emptiness of their practice. 2) That the Egyptians would revere the Children of Israel as gods because as shepherds, they exercise control over the creatures they idolize. These seem to be mutually exclusive explanations. Either the Egyptians really believed in those little sheep or they didn't. Can both be true?

There is a story about a king that went to investigate if anyone in his kingdom might be happier than he. So he dressed up as a commoner and listened by the windows of his subjects for their complaints. Convinced that he was the most happy he headed home. Along the way he was pulled to the sound of a joyous violin. Peeking into the window he beheld an elderly Jew happy as could be. The king plotted to sabotage the joy of the Jew. He pretended to be a beggar, and learned of the Jew's means of livelihood. The very next day the king outlawed the Jew's profession. The Jew found a new way to earn a living. When the king came out that night to witness the wails of desperation he was surprised to hear that joyous violin and behold the ever radiant countenance Jew. The king repeated his effort again and again only to find out the next night that the Jew found a different way.

The king was growing more desperate. One night the Jew told him that he had found a secure job in the king's army as a guard. He confided in him that in order to get paid on time though he had first to carve a wooden sword to leave in the sheath and then pawn temporarily the real metal one till pay day at the end of the month. Could the king outlaw his own army? What was he to do?

The next day when the elder Jew went to sign in for his daily assignment he was surprised to find out that he had been ordered to go directly to the king's palace. There in the opulent setting he failed to recognize the beggar who had been his guest each night that week dressed in royal robes.

There the king presented a disheveled man that the king declared to be a thief and he ordered the now nervous Jew to take out his sword and execute the man according to the law of the land. The Jew hemmed and hawed and questioned the certainty of the verdict whereupon the king ordered him to kill or be killed for disobeying his orders. The Jew knew that if he would expose his sword he would be similarly charged.

Then with help from heaven in the last instant he asked the king if it would be alright if he first said a prayer. The king impatiently agreed and the old Jew began to recite aloud, "G-d Almighty, my earthly king has ordered me to execute this man which I am ready to do, but if he is really innocent and not deserving of this punishment then perform an open miracle before the eyes of all assembled here now and turn my sword into wood. With that he pulled out his wooden sword and all were astonished by the apparent miracle while the king was shamed into silence.

So Joseph estimated correctly that either way his family would be safe to declare themselves as shepherds. 1) The blind adherents to Egyptian culture would offer extra honor to those who control at will their gods. 2) While those who know in their heart of hearts the real emptiness of their belief system would be quietly abhorrent of those who know. Text Copyright &copy 2006 by Rabbi Label Lam and **Torah.org**.