

NO NEED TO SELL YOURSELF

by Rabbi Yaakov Menken

"It happened that when Pharaoh sent the nation out of Egypt, G-d did not lead them by way of the land of the Philistines, although it was close..." [13:17]

According to the *Chofetz Chaim*, Rabbi Yisroel M. Kagan, G-d had two choices, each of which had its good and bad aspects.

The first choice was to lead the Nation of Israel through the land of the *Pelishtim* (Philistines), in which food was available, but where the degraded practices of the *Pelishtim* could be witnessed. The Jewish people had been repeatedly exposed to the Egyptians and their ways during the centuries they spent in that country, and this had influenced them - so much so that our Sages, who explain that there are fifty different "gates" of impurity, also tell us that the people of Israel had descended through forty-nine during the Egyptian exile. Had they gone further, through the fiftieth gate, they would have been "beyond redemption." There was a great danger that the *Pelishtim* could also influence Israel, and perhaps even draw them down through the fiftieth gate.

The alternative was the desert, which was entirely pure - but was also bereft of food. How could several million people survive there?

HaShem's final decision was that it was better to take the people through the desert, avoiding the temptations of the *Pelishtim*. In order to avoid starvation, he brought them *Manna* - miraculous food from Heaven. This was preferable to risking further spiritual descent on Israel's part.

[Obviously, *HaShem* could also simply have made the Nation of Israel impervious to the effects of the *Pelishtim*. But as mentioned last week, free will is critical to a Jewish understanding of Creation and our reasons for being here, and thus we might understand why even an open miracle might be preferable to changing human nature, even for a short time.]

This, says the *Chofetz Chaim*, is the response to all those who "sell themselves" into inappropriate businesses and business dealings, claiming that their behavior is necessary "to make a living." One who claims to believe that G-d could sustain and support 600,000 men - and thus several million men, women and children - in miraculous fashion, must certainly believe that He can provide bread and sustenance to someone who follows His ways, and engages only in honest business.

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The author is the Director of Project Genesis.