

# LIVING IN "DENILE"

*by Rabbi Yaakov Menken*

Pharaoh's behavior in the face of the plagues was bizarre, even suicidal. Confronting the obvious, he refused to change his ways.

Initially, Pharaoh's magicians encouraged his resistance. They claimed that the plague of blood was mere magic. "And the magicians of Egypt did likewise with their secret arts, and Pharaoh's heart was hardened and he did not listen to them, as HaShem had said." [7:22]

After frogs covered Egypt, Pharaoh strengthened himself. "And then Pharaoh saw that there was relief, and he hardened his heart and did not listen to them." [8:11]

By the time the third plague hit him, Pharaoh was ready. "Then the magicians said to Pharaoh, 'this is the finger of G-d' -- but Pharaoh hardened his heart, and he did not listen to them." [8:15] The Ramban writes that even though the magicians now admitted that the plagues came from G-d, Pharaoh was so committed that he rid himself of the magicians rather than admit his error. He never called upon them again, because he knew that they were "weak" -- meaning they saw reality staring them in the face.

After the fifth plague, pestilence, "Pharaoh's heart was hardened." [9:7] It itself was hardened. He did not need to strengthen it; he was so invested in denial of reality that nothing could change him -- nothing natural, that is.

Then the sixth plague, that of boils, hit the Egyptians. Now the evidence was so overwhelming, that the Torah says that "G-d Hardened Pharaoh's heart, and he did not listen to them, as G-d had told Moshe." [9:12]

The Ramban offers two explanations of this statement. One is that no one could have withstood this test on his own, but G-d Himself allowed Pharaoh to choose to deny G-d. The other explanation is perhaps even more surprising: that now, all of Egypt recognized what Pharaoh could not see. There was no one to support Pharaoh -- only his own, G-d-given inner strength. And he used it to deny G-d!

Pharaoh's attitude seems (rightly) laughable, but have we not seen this attitude in our own day? People who, once committed to a dream, cannot bear to wake up no matter how strong the coffee? If we need an answer, we need look no further than this week's news about a boat called Karine A. No one credibly denies that this weapon-laden ship was bound for the Palestinian Authority, which

had no reason to possess long-range Katyusha rockets. No reason, that is, other than to kill more Israelis in acts of terrorism. The PA was talking peace, arming itself for war, and eliminating our fantasy that it might honor any truce, any cease-fire, any peace -- rather than using the time to arm itself once again. This bad dream is no less suicidal than Pharaoh's, and it is time to awaken.

Even more people share Pharaoh's error itself: denial of G-d. "Who is this G-d that I should listen to His voice, to send out Israel?" [5:2] Pharaoh denied G-d, while the Jew bore witness to His presence. The historical mission of the Jewish People is to declare that G-d is here, with us. We, unlike Pharaoh, have never claimed the ability to stand on our own.

Freud declared that religion was "the opiate of the masses." He was wrong, because opium does not improve lives. Religious commitment -- recognition that G-d is with us, and we depend upon His help -- leads to more stable families, reduced stress, even lower rates of heart attacks. That's sociology, not philosophy. All of this has been measured.

And, of course, G-d is no hallucination. We have seen many miracles throughout our history, but none is perhaps so great as the fact that we still survive today. The nations that oppressed us are gone: Egypt has no Pharaohs, the Greeks and Romans no empires. The Cossacks, the Communists, and the Nazis have all fallen. And here we are. Mark Twain wrote poignantly about the mysterious immortality of the Jew, for it defies logic.

We, however, make individual choices -- whether we plan to be part of that immortality, or deny it. There is no mission without G-d. If we follow our mission, and fan the spark of holy Jewish spirituality within ourselves, then we help build history's miracle. But if we deny G-d a place in our lives, then we cannot wonder when our children assimilate.

Each and every day, we make choices. And G-d prompts us: Choose Life!

Good Shabbos