

Kindly take a moment to study MISHNAS CHAYIM in the merit of
Rochel *bas* Yisroel *a"h*
a fellow Jew who passed away with no relatives to arrange Torah study on behalf of her *neshamah*

Heading Off the Hail

PARSHAS VA'EIRA 5776

There is an expression people use to describe inclement weather. In the case of a heavy downpour, they will say: "It's raining cats and dogs."

Interestingly enough, this curious expression seems to have its roots in medieval times. What passed for construction during that time was a far cry from what it is today. Thus, the houses were often little more than rickety structures. The roofs, specifically, left much to be desired; rather than strong trusses covered by high-quality shingles, the roofs were little more than beams and thatch-work. Not surprisingly, animals would often take up residence in these relatively porous coverings, which would tend to unravel as the weather turned more severe. Then, not only would the roofs leak rainwater, but the animals themselves would fall through. Hence, it would "rain cats and dogs."

Go back even farther – to a more primitive time period. Presumably, the houses in ancient Egypt, by and large, were not much more formidable than their medieval counterparts.

Home Sweet Home?

Which leads us to the plague of *barad* (hail). In the lead-up to its arrival, Moshe, in this week's *parshah*, issued the following warning: וְעַתָּה שְׁלַח הָעֵז אֶת־מִקְנֶה וְאֵת כָּל־אֲשֶׁר לְךָ בַּשָּׂדֶה וְלֹא יֵאָסֵף הַבַּיִתָּה וְיָרֵד עֲלֵהֶם הַבָּרָד וּמָתוּ – "And now, send for and gather in your cattle and all that you have in the field; any man or beast that shall be found in the field and not gathered into the house – the hail shall descend on them, and they shall die" (*Shemos* 9:19). The implication, of course, is that those who would be gathered inside would be safe from the hailstorm.

But why, exactly, would these houses be considered a safe haven in the face of the raining hailstones? Recall that we are not necessarily talking about roofs of reinforced concrete. Even if there were a few Egyptian houses with strong roofs, presumably – as stated above – there were also many others that were flimsy at best. If cats and dogs would fall through, the hail would most likely come through as well! And yet, the intimation seems to be that as long as everyone would be brought inside, they'd be spared the effects of the hail. How could this be?

To which we may add the following point: Consider an ordinary Egyptian farmer. He was probably none too wealthy, and the quality and size of his residence most likely reflected this fact. One asset he did have was livestock. Now he was informed that *barad* was coming, and – if he was smart – he would bring all his animals indoors. Where exactly was he supposed to put them? Was it truly realistic to expect that every Egyptian with animals owned a house of considerable size?

Defining a "House"

R' Shimon Yehudah Diskin (*Masas Hamelech, parshas Va'eira*) provides a novel approach to resolve these issues. He bases his exposition on a most significant comment of the Brisker

Rav regarding this episode. The Torah, as we have seen, offered a provision that those who remained indoors would be spared the effects of the *barad*. The Brisker Rav clarifies that this was not due to the inherent protection afforded by the house; it was not that the roofs deflected the *barad*, but that the hail simply did not fall on any houses. The Divine decree was that the hail would only fall in open areas.

R' Diskin makes a most remarkable derivation from this idea. If the Divine decree stated that the hail would not fall on a “house,” it follows that any structure that technically qualified as a “house” would be spared. What emerges, then, is that the inhabitants of a house would be safe – even if the roof was wide open to the sky!

To better appreciate this resolution, it is worthwhile to clarify certain technical matters.

Many areas of *halachah* (e.g. *eruv*, *sukkah*) deal with the technical issues of structural area. Obviously, it is not possible here to provide even a semblance of a thorough overview of this highly complex and involved topic. Let us suffice to say that there are certain *halachic* devices that are employed to account for the necessary dimensions of a *halachic* structure.

As one example out of many, we cite the concept of “*lavud*” (*halachically* extended and attached), as it appears in connection with constructing the walls of a *sukkah* (*Sukkah* 1:6):

המשלשל דפנות מלמעלה למטה, אם גבוהה מן הארץ שלשה טפחים, פסולה.

“One erecting walls fastened from above and extending downward (but not quite reaching the floor): If there is a gap of three handbreadths between the ground (and the walls’ edge closest to the ground), it is disqualified.”

The implication, of course, is that the *sukkah* is deemed to be kosher as long as the gap is less than three handbreadths – *even though the walls don’t quite reach the ground*. The principle known as *lavud* states that – for all intents and purposes – a gap of under three handbreadths is considered to be “filled in.” What emerges, then, is that in a *halachic* sense the walls are considered to be closed up, even where they are physically missing space.

According to R' Diskin, *halachic* devices such as this played a significant role during the plague of *barad*. The actual construction and durability of a given structure was effectively immaterial.

Consider the *eruv*, where what may seem to us to be a simple string – under certain guidelines – is viewed in *halachah* as a valid partition. And so it was with the Egyptian houses; as long as they met the *halachic* criteria of a “house” – through *lavud* or whatever other relevant principle – those inside were safe from the plague.

And by employing similar methods, even the poor farmer could solve his problem of storage. Where would he find sufficient space to keep all of his animals indoors? Based on the above, we see that the feat could be readily accomplished even in the absence of actual, quality buildings. The farmer could simply set up a makeshift, *eruv*-like structure, which would qualify as a *halachic* building. No matter how physically “unfit” it might have been, as long as it met the relevant *halachic* parameters, it would provide all the protection necessary.