

**The cruel despot turned
to the youngest and last
remaining son**

ONE OF THE MOST FAMOUS incidents associated with Chanukah is the story of Chana and her seven sons who gave their lives rather than bow down to an idol. A variation of this story is related in the Midrash (Eichah Rabbah 1:50). The Midrash describes in graphic detail how the emperor demanded from each son, starting with the oldest one, that he submit to idol worship. Without hesitation, each one quoted a *pasuk* from the Torah as an affirmation of his steadfast belief in Hashem and courageously gave his life *al kiddush Hashem* – to sanctify Hashem's name. After six sons lay dead before him, martyred for their faith, the cruel despot turned to the youngest and last remaining son, and encouraged him with various methods of persuasion to bow down before the graven image, promising him wealth and honor. This precocious young lad (Chazal tell us that he was a brilliant child, only two and a half years of age) refused to be tempted by these offers, quoting *p'sukim* of his own for emphasis.

Finally the king realized that he could not force the boy to worship stone and wood. In an attempt to save face in the eyes of all the onlookers who had seen six brothers defy him – and now possibly the seventh – he tried to strike a compromise. He told the boy that he would put his golden ring on the floor before the idol, and the boy would merely bend over to pick it up, appearing to bow to the idol but not actually worshiping it. The boy disdainfully refused, exclaiming, "I pity you, for you are afraid of your flesh and blood subjects and what they will think of you how much more so should I fear and obey the King of kings, Hashem, who is eternal!"

Why was the king afraid?

The young child's perceptive analysis of the emperor's motivations offers us a key insight in human behavior. Why was the king afraid? Perhaps the most powerful ruler on earth, he was an absolute monarch who could put any subject to death at his mere whim. He already showed his power by killing the brothers. The spectators should fear him but why should he have any fear of them?

No matter how powerful or influential a person is, he can be permeated with a fear of what others think of him. Man has a need for the acceptance and respect of those around him. The emperor was desperate to gain the approval of his subjects by showing that he could control these defiant Jews. All his power and wealth would not help him if his subjects looked upon him disparagingly.

The need for approval of others is rooted in the drive for *kovod* – honor, and frequently in a person's own lack of self esteem. If one is secure in the realization of his own value and worth as a *tzelem Elokim* – a creation in the image of Hashem Himself – he will have no need or desire for approval or praise. In essence, he is afraid of Hashem alone, and not influenced by the opinions of flesh and blood.

**Many Jews are tempted
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footsteps**

Today, as in the time of the Maccabees, we are surrounded by a culture whose values are different and often at odds with those of the Torah. Many Jews are tempted to follow in society's footsteps, in the hopes of gaining the respect and approval of their non Jewish neighbors. The flames of the Chanukah lights remind us that the Jew is afraid of no one but Hashem, and as that little boy courageously defied the emperor, we can be confident in our unique Torah lifestyle, values and our glorious heritage.