

THE POWER OF TORAH AFFECTS INANIMATE OBJECTS WHEREVER THEY ARE (BY RABBI DAVID HANANIA PINTO SHLITA)

With regards to the giving of the Torah, it is written: "The entire mountain trembled greatly.... The L-RD descended upon Mount Sinai, to the top of the mountain" (Exodus 19:18-20). We need to understand what this trembling, this expression of fear, has to do with an inanimate object such as a mountain, which possesses no body, mind, or soul. We should also explain what it means that Hashem "descended" upon the mountain, since the whole world is filled with His glory (Isaiah 6:3) and no place is devoid of His presence (Zohar Chadash, Yitro 57b). Furthermore, why does the verse specify that Hashem descended to the top of the mountain? What would have been missing had the verse stated that Hashem simply descended to the mountain? We shall attempt to answer these questions. At the giving of the Torah, that great and awesome event, the Holy One, blessed be He, revealed Himself to His people Israel so that everyone on earth would know and realize that the world has a Creator. He is the One from Whom the entire universe derives its existence, and every living thing is in His hands. He can kill or bring to life, lower or lift up from the abyss. We can clearly see the sign of Hashem in every created being, not only in terms of belief, but in terms of a concrete sense that everything comes from G-d and that the whole world is filled with His glory.

At the creation of the world, before the first sin, all of Creation knew that it had a ruler, and everything was good because the entire world clearly saw the connection between creature and Creator. It was only after the sin that this connection was broken and things looked different, for neither Hashem's presence nor His power could be perceived.

At the giving of the Torah, however, all of Creation reverted to its previous state, for the Children of Israel were encamped before the mountain like a single person with a single heart. From G-d's mouth they heard the words, "I am the L-RD," at which point the evil inclination was torn from their hearts, as the Sages said (Shabbat 146a; Yalkut Shimoni, Shir Hashirim 581). Faith in Hashem was engraved in its place, and they were able to restore things to their initial state. Wherever the Children of Israel were, they infused it with a vibrant sanctity, causing the mountain itself to fear Hashem's holiness and the greatness of His glory. In fact the Children of Israel were able to see the mountain's fear, to actually perceive and sense the fear of an intimate object, an amazing thing indeed.

Why, however, was the mountain frightened? The answer lies in the fact that up to that point all of Creation depended on the giving of the Torah. If the Children of Israel accepted it, the universe would continue to exist. Otherwise it would return to a state of chaos (Shabbat 88a). Because the Children of Israel accepted it and said, "We will do and we will hear" (Exodus 24:7), the mountain achieved its goal and was frightened, for at that point the reality of Hashem made itself felt. This is why "the sound of the shofar grew increasingly stronger" (ibid. 19:19), for the Children of Israel energetically prepared themselves to hear the sound of the Torah. Reflecting on this, we see a profound meaning in the mountain's fear. Hashem's descent upon Mount Sinai teaches us a great lesson, for due to the humility and self-effacement of Mount Sinai before the other

mountains (since it did not grow proud), Hashem descended upon it and the Torah was given there (see Sotah 5a). Yet instead of rejoicing in the fact that Hashem descended upon it to give the Torah, the mountain was frightened. It was afraid that it was not worthy of such a gift.

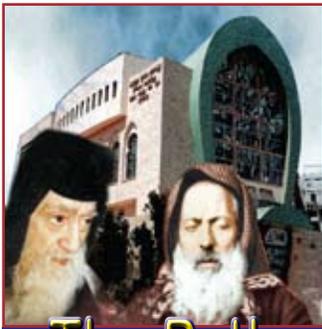
This is truly amazing, for instead of rejoicing in its role and legacy in the giving of the Torah, Mount Sinai was afraid that Hashem had descended upon it. Equally amazing is the fact that an inanimate object could feel and speak.

As we know, the Shechinah dwelled in all places and was felt everywhere before the sin of the first man. However it later withdrew to its celestial abode. When the Children of Israel rectified the sin of the first man by redeeming the 288 sparks of holiness, the sentiment that "His kingdom rules over all" returned. Still, Mount Sinai completely nullified itself before the other mountains, for it was extremely frightened that the glory of Hashem would descend upon it. Therefore what can be said for us, among whom the Holy One, blessed be He, dwells at all times? We must obviously learn to sense a referential fear of Hashem and the glory of His kingdom in all places.

This is why the mountain, an inanimate object, could speak and even sanctify itself. In fact when the Holy One, blessed be He, considered giving His Torah to the Jewish people on a mountain, when He desired to descend upon one of them, all of the mountains became sanctified despite being inanimate objects. Nevertheless it was Mount Sinai that, on account of its humility, merited this event.

From here we understand the concept of Hashem's descent, as it were, upon the mountain. From the fact that the Children of Israel took upon themselves the yoke of the Torah and its mitzvot, and because they saw that Mount Sinai was frightened before Hashem, they also merited to feel and perceive the reality of Hashem. They logically inferred that if an inanimate mountain could sense Hashem's presence, then how much more should a human being, who possesses a soul, sense it! Actually, a pure soul is always sensing Hashem's presence, and it is only sin that hides this perception, as it is written: "Your iniquities have separated between you and your G-d" (Isaiah 59:2). Yet now that the evil inclination had been torn from their hearts, the Children of Israel merited perceiving and sensing the reality of Hashem. For them it was a sign that the Holy One, blessed be He, could be found in every place and at all times, though His holiness can only be felt through the study of Torah. Commenting on the verse, "G-d saw the light, that it was good" (Genesis 1:4), Rashi cites the Sages in stating: "He saw that it was not proper for the wicked to use it, so He separated it for the righteous in the future".

In fact as the Torah was being given and Hashem revealed Himself on the top of the mountain, the Children of Israel were able to see the light that had been hidden in the Torah, as mentioned in our holy books. It is by the power of Torah that the righteous can ceaselessly study, and it is by its power that this hidden light is revealed to them. From here we learn that even inanimate objects can be affected by the power of Torah, and therefore the same is true of man. By the power of Torah a person can, even without a prior connection to it, awaken himself and return to Hashem with all his heart and soul.



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GUARD YOUR TONGUE!

Defending Yourself Against Lashon Harah

A person who learns that his friend has spoken against him has no permission to answer in kind by speaking against him. Often times when a person is asked, "Why did you speak against so and so," he will say: "Because he spoke Lashon Harah about me!" This common answer is based on a grave misconception that many people make, an error that has no basis in fact.

Mr. Friedman knows that during a meeting from which he was absent, Menashe accused him of being a liar in front of everyone. Although Menashe sinned against him, Mr. Friedman has absolutely no permission to speak against him in return. Nevertheless, he has every right to take the necessary steps to defend himself from the damage resulting from Menashe's words.

MUSSAR FROM THE PARSHA

The Heart of Man to Man

It is written, "Israel encamped there, opposite the mountain" (Exodus 19:2).

Rashi comments, "Like a single person with a single heart."

In the Beit Din of Rabbi Yosef Chaim Sonnenfeld Zatzal, the judges were discussing a case brought before them and rendering their decision: So and so is guilty, and so and so is innocent. An ordinary day in the Beit Din, or so it would seem. However the story did not end there.

On Friday night, Rabbi Yosef Chaim was sitting at the Shabbat table with his students, and everyone was carefully listening to his words so as not to miss the slightest pearl of wisdom. Suddenly the door burst open and a group of thugs made their way inside and caused a huge ruckus. Their leader was none other than the man whom the Beit Din had declared guilty. All the students, as well as Rabbi Yosef Chaim, feared for their lives, a fear that only increased when the man threatened Rabbi Chaim if he didn't overturn his decision!

Rabbi Yosef Chaim examined the situation and decided to risk his life rather than change his verdict for any reason. He was not inclined to change anything, not even the smallest thing, in our holy Torah. After all the trouble he went through, if he had reached the right decision according to our holy Torah, then he was not going to change it. He fixed his gaze on his adversary and firmly told him, "I won't change my decision in any way, and I'm prepared to die in order to sanctify G-d's Name." At that point an incredible transformation occurred in the heart of the man. He stepped back, bowed before the Rav, and left quietly. Needless to say, Rabbi Yosef Chaim's students were speechless, for how could such a miracle have happened? The Rav explained: "When I saw that he clearly intended on carrying out his plans, I was also afraid. However I immediately realized how unhappy such a man must be. He was showing his friends that he hadn't been raised in a Torah environment, and it was clear that he never merited witnessing a prayer that was uttered from the heart, as I had from my teachers. In that case, what was so surprising that he reached such a state? I felt pity for him and I loved him just as any other Jew is loved, especially when it involves such an unhappy Jew as himself. Hence we fulfilled the verse, 'As in water face answers to face, so does the heart of man to man' [Proverbs 27:19]. His heart became filled with a sincere love for me, which is why he withdrew."

The same occurred when the Torah was given, for every Jew was attentive to the needs of the other. Every Jew loved the other like his very own soul, meaning that just as "face answers to face, so does the heart of man to man" – the other felt the same love for him. From that point they arrived at, "Like a single person with a single heart." Because of the unity of their souls, they merited to receive the holy Torah from G-d – from the One G-d to the one people. Our Sages reveal this concept to us in the Midrash: "Hezekiah said: Great is peace.... When they all arrived before Mount Sinai, they all became one encampment. This is indicated by what is written: 'Israel encamped there, opposite the mountain.' ... Said the Holy One, blessed be He: 'This is the hour at which I am giving the Torah to My children'" (Vayikra Rabba 9:9).

A Pearl From the Rav

After the Torah was given it is written: "An altar of earth shall you make" (Exodus 20:21). In his book Pahad David, Rabbi David Pinto Shlita explains that the first letters of this expression (mizbeach adama ta'asseh) form the word emet ("truth"), and its last letters have the same numerical value (18) as the word chai ("life"). This teaches us by allusion that the Torah is called truth, as we say: "Who gave us a Torah of truth." It is also called life.

He explains that the Torah can only be drawn to a person who is ready to live as an altar, namely with devotion in addition to humility, as the Sages have said: "Words of Torah endure only with one who is humble" (Taanith 7a). In that case it will be li ("for me"), which has a numerical value of 40 (i.e., the Torah that was given in 40 days), for then it will endure with him.

His Decrees and His Laws for Israel

It is written, "Jethro, the priest of Midian, the father-in-law of Moses, heard" (Exodus 18:1).

Rashi writes, "What news did he hear that he came? The splitting of the Sea of Reeds and the war with Amalek."

Was the giving of the Torah not greater than all these things? Why then did Rashi not say that Jethro heard of the giving of the Torah? We also need to understand why Moses, when he described to his father-in-law all that Hashem had done to Pharaoh and the Egyptians, failed to mention the giving of the Torah.

We may answer these questions by citing a story recorded in the Midrash: "Aquila once said to the Emperor Hadrian, 'I wish to convert and become an Israelite.' The reply was, 'After this people do you hanker? Look how I degraded it, and how many of them I killed! You wish to ally yourself with the lowliest of peoples? What do you see in them that you now wish to convert?' He replied, 'The least among them knows how G-d created the world and what was created on the first and second day, and how long it is since the world was created and on what the world is founded. Moreover, their law is one of truth.' He then said to him, 'Go and study their law, but do not become circumcised.' To this he retorted, 'Unless he be circumcised, even the wisest in your kingdom, even a gray bearded man of 100 years, cannot study their Torah,' for so it is written: 'He declares His word to Jacob, His statutes and judgments to Israel. He did not do this for any other nation' [Psalms 147:19] – except for the Children of Israel" (Shemot Rabba 30:12).

Here we see a great principle at work: A non-Jew cannot fully grasp or possess an in-depth understanding of our holy Torah. Intelligence alone is not enough, for it also requires the soul and holiness of a Jew, even with regards to the decrees of the Torah. Hence even Jethro, before he converted, could not be told about the giving of the Torah. Such issues require the soul of a Jew; they require a non-Jew to convert. Only then can he understand the importance of the giving of the Torah.

– Darchei Mussar

Judging Yourself

It is written, "For in the very thing wherein they acted wickedly with them" (Exodus 18:11).

The Baal Shem Tov said that every man is judged in Heaven according to his own words. If he sees his friend committing an unacceptable deed, he will judge him to be deserving of such and such a punishment, all while forgetting that he once did the very same thing himself, and that he will be judged by his own words.

This is the meaning of the verse, "For in the very thing wherein they acted wickedly with them," namely that one's punishment is always determined by oneself.

– Ma'ayana Shel Torah

Capable Men

It is written, "You shall choose among all the people capable men, those who fear G-d" (Exodus 18:21).

Why did the judges have to be capable men? Were they about to go to war? They were chosen solely to render Torah decisions!

The reason is that if a judge appears mild or weak, to the point of being unable to confront and punish a criminal, then the people will have tremendous problems. Hence judges have to be capable men, individuals who are able to control their own sense of compassion for those who commit transgressions, and able to issue a fitting punishment in order for everyone to hear and fear.

– The Noda B'Yehuda

The Judge Who Never Saw a Litigant

It is written, "When they have a matter, it comes to me" (Exodus 18:16).

Since "they have a matter," the verse should have continued by stating, "they come to me." However the expression "it comes to me" refers to the matter itself.

The matter alone comes to me, meaning that I render a decision based on the matter itself, not on the parties involved or on secondary issues.

It is said that the Rav of Bialystok, the gaon and author of Marot HaTzovot, never looked at the litigants during a Din Torah, for he didn't want to know who they were. Instead he remained seated with his eyes closed while listening to the claims of both sides. He was afraid that if he knew a litigant, it could affect his impartiality and the outcome of the case.

What Business Was Moses Occupied With?

It is written, "Moses descended from the mountain to the people" (Exodus 19:14).

Here Rashi states, "This teaches that Moses did not turn to his affairs, but went directly from the mountain to the people."

The author of Tiferet Shlomo, Rabbi Shlomo HaKohen of Radomsk, once visited the home of the Rebbe of Kuzmir at the start of Shavuot. When he told the Rebbe that he wanted to stay with him until the end of the holiday, the Rebbe said: "Rashi tells us that Moses did not occupy himself with his own business, but instead went directly from the mountain to the people. This is difficult to understand, for what business did Moses have? Was he involved in selling wood or some other business? What it means is that when Moses had to act for Israel, to bring them closer to their Father in Heaven, he even put the service of the Creator aside. He did this in order to focus primarily on elevating Israel to a lofty spiritual level."

– Ma'ayana Shel Torah

Remember and Observe – Together!

It is written: "Zachor [Remember] the Sabbath day, to sanctify it" (Exodus 20:8) and "Shamor [Observe] the Sabbath day, to sanctify it" (Deuteronomy 5:12).

Different people choose to favor either zachor ("remember") or shamor ("observe") with regards to Shabbat. The poor favor shamor, for they are not overly involved in business affairs and have nothing to lose by observing Shabbat. For them zachor is the difficult part, for they lack the money to honor Shabbat with good wine and choice meals. Conversely, the rich favor zachor because they can comply with it in every detail, given that they have the money to purchase all kinds of delicacies. Yet for them shamor is the difficult part, for they think that they will lose a great deal of money by closing their businesses on Shabbat.

This is why our Sages said that the words zachor and shamor were said simultaneously at the giving of the Torah, meaning that we absolutely cannot favor one over the other. The poor must also remember (zachor) Shabbat, and the rich must also observe (shamor) Shabbat.

– The Maggid of Dubno

Overview of the Parsha

In Parsha Yitro the Children of Israel have already left Egypt and are encamped by the mountain of G-d. There they become G-d's chosen people by receiving His Torah.

The parsha begins with Jethro's arrival at Israel's camp. He comes because he has heard of all that G-d had done for Moses and His people. When Jethro sees Moses judging the people all by himself from morning till night, he gives his son-in-law some advice. The Children of Israel journey from Rephidim to the desert of Sinai, where they encamp before Mount Sinai. There they sanctify themselves and get ready to hear G-d's words in the Ten Commandments. After the giving of the Torah, during which time they saw no image (since Hashem spoke to them "from Heaven"), they are warned not to use overly tangible symbols in serving Hashem. Instead they are to make use of an altar.

REASONS FOR THE MITZVOT

Gratitude – A Timeless Virtue

It is written, "Honor your father and your mother, so that your days will be long on the land that the L-RD your G-d gives you" (Exodus 20:12).

"The barbarians are coming! The barbarians are coming!" When this cry was heard in a certain European village, every Jew knew that it was a perilous time, a time to flee! They took only what they could escape with quickly on that winter night, as the intense cold pierced their bones. However the cold was a trivial matter, for the danger to their lives was real. They had to flee as quickly as possible because their savage attackers were out for blood. Making their way in the darkness, these Jews came to a bridge that they decided to cross. Suddenly disaster struck, for a small girl fell into the frigid river. Several men quickly tried to save her, managing to pull her out of the freezing water. They immediately lit a fire to warm the girl, but sparks landed on her clothing and once again her life was in jeopardy. Yet because Hashem is compassionate, He saved her from this as well.

"Do you know who that little girl was?" Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin asked his students. "She was the grandmother of my great teacher the Vilna Gaon. That's why I have to show my gratitude to the Creator for having rescued her. I must recite the blessing, 'Who performed a miracle for me in this place.' Perhaps you should also recite this blessing."

Dozens of years had passed since the rescue of that little girl. Yet Rabbi Chaim still realized that this gap did not excuse him from showing gratitude, a mitzvah that applies for all time, even when the object of our gratitude does not occur to us directly. Here Rabbi Chaim teaches us a great lesson concerning this mitzvah.

That being the case, how much more should we thank and be grateful to our parents, who went to so much trouble in raising us! They devoted their days and their nights to this task, taking upon themselves the responsibility of our education and our health. They didn't flinch from the cold or the heat, and they were always by our side to help. Can we ever repay them for even a thousandth of what they have done for us?

What does the Creator require of us? He wants us to respect them. Is that really so difficult? Everyone should deeply implant in their soul the virtue of demonstrating gratitude. They should constantly get used to this trait and cling to it, for in this way they will also see the innumerable benefits that we receive from our Father in Heaven at each moment in life. This applies even if a person no longer sees the need to thank G-d for the things He gives us, such as for our soul, which is always present, as well as for our health. We must get out of the rut that these habits have put us in. We have to stop and think of all the benefits we receive from G-d, and we must thank, glorify, and praise the Creator of the universe for every moment in life.

EISHET CHAYIL

The Prayer of the Agunah

In the year 5727, during the Six-Day War, students from the Mir yeshiva sought refuge in the yeshiva's bomb shelter, which was located beneath the dining hall. They were afraid, however, that a bomb would come through the roof and land there. As it turned out, three large unexploded bombs were found on the yeshiva's roof after the war!

Rabbi Chaim Shmuelevitz Zatzal said, "A woman who lived near the yeshiva sought refuge in its shelter. An agunah from her youth [a woman whose husband has gone missing, and therefore she cannot remarry], she had been left with young children to care for. In the shelter I heard her praying: 'Master of the universe, I know that in the day of judgment I will be able to accuse my husband by saying: "You left me as an agunah with small children to care for." If I make that claim, however, my husband will be found guilty and I will be innocent. However I am ready to forsake all my complaints if You forgive our sins.'

"Know," Rabbi Chaim concluded, "that this prayer, which came from the very depths of her heart, is what saved the yeshiva."

YOUR EYES SHALL BEHOLD YOUR TEACHER

Rabbi Yaakov Weidenfeld – The Av Beit Din and Rav of Hormilov

In the world of Torah study, the gaon Rabbi Yaakov Weidenfeld Zatzal, the Av Beit Din and Rav of Hormilov, is known to have been fully versed in every field of Torah. The book Kochav MiYaakov was published from his Halachic responsa, though only a tiny portion of them, for the great majority of his works went up in flames. Rabbi Yaakov was famous already from his early youth, and the great Torah figures of his generation (including the author of Divrei Chaim, Rabbi Halberstam of Sanz) admired his depth of thought and Torah understanding. In fact with his penetrating mind he dealt with the most difficult passages in the Gemara, to the extent of making everything perfectly clear. When he reached the age of marriage, he wed the daughter of the gaon Rabbi Shabtai Rappaport (the Av Beit Din of Dombrova) and continued with his in-depth Torah studies. It was from that moment on, while still young, that rabbis and great Torah figures addressed diverse Halachic questions to him. These included Rabbi Mordechai Zeev Ettinga of Lvov and the Rebbe of Sochatchov, Rabbi Avraham Borenstein. Apart from his greatness in Torah, Rabbi Yaakov was generous with everyone in terms of his money and his deeds. In fact to him people applied the teaching, “Who is a chassid? He who conducts himself with chesed toward his Creator.”

Rabbi Yaakov Weidenfeld left behind three sons who were as great as himself: Rabbi Yitzchak (who succeeded him as the Rav of Hormilov), Rabbi Nachum (the Av Beit Din of Dombrova and author of Chazon Nachum), and Rabbi Dov Berish Weidenfeld (known as the Tchebiner Rav). After the Holocaust, Rabbi Dov Berish went to live in Israel and founded the Tchebin yeshiva in Jerusalem.

Rabbi Yaakov Weidenfeld departed from this world on Shevat 21, 5654. May the memory of the tzaddik be blessed.

IN THE LIGHT OF THE HAFTORAH

Looking for Wings

It is written, “Each one had six wings” (Isaiah 6:2).

When Rabbi Israel of Rozhin Zatzal came to Sadigora, Galicia from Russia, his fame excited everyone in the land, and a huge crowd prepared to greet him. A large number of people gathered in the city of Kosov, from where they would travel to Sadigora to gaze upon his saintly countenance.

When a youngster in Kosov saw the multitude preparing to leave, he was curious. He was told that a Rabbi as great as an angel had arrived in Sadigora, and that people were going there to meet him. In his innocence, the youngster thought that an angel had actually come to earth, and he also wanted to see him. He therefore paid a coachman and traveled to Sadigora.

When the group from his town arrived, the youngster went along with them to see the Rabbi of Rozhin. After the reception, when everyone had left the Rabbi's room, the youngster remained standing in the synagogue. His eyes were riveted on the Rabbi as he examined him from all angles. The Shamash asked him, “Where are you from, my boy?” to which he replied: “From Kosov.” The Shamash then asked, “And what are you doing here?” He said, “I heard that one of Hashem's angels has come here, and before Shavuot my teacher taught me from the Akdamot that angels have six wings. I'm looking for his wings.”

When the tzaddik of Rozhin heard the youngster's remark, he said to the Shamash: “Bring him to see all six of my holy sons. He will then see my wings.”

– Torat HaParasha

A TRUE STORY

The Blessing of an Elderly Kohen

It is written, “You shall not ascend My altar on steps” (Exodus 20:23).

During the first General Assembly of Agudath Israel in Vienna, the rabbis asked the Chafetz Chaim to speak in honor of the event, but he declined. Yet because people were insistent, he went up on stage and gave the following address: “ ‘You shall not ascend My altar on ma'alot [steps].’ This is a warning to the Kohen that he must remember, when he ascends Hashem's altar to offer a sacrifice, that he did not ascend due to his personal ma'alot [virtues], nor because of his middot or intellectual abilities. He merited this great honor only because he was the son of a Kohen.

“When I was asked to come up on stage and bless everyone gathered for this holy assembly, I wondered why this great honor was being given to me. When I was told that it was because of my supposed greatness in Torah and fame as a scholar, I completely refused. I am not a scholar, nor am I great in Torah. When I was told that it was because of my supposed piety and righteousness, I also refused, for I do not possess these characteristics either. It was only when people implored me to speak because I was an elderly Kohen... that is when I could no longer refuse! Old age is a gift from G-d, and the priesthood is a heritage from my father. Because of these two things that Hashem has given me, I now give you my blessing, the blessing of an elderly man and a Kohen!”

– Shulchan Melachim

THE DEEDS OF THE GREAT

The Emperor's Legions

Onkelos the son of Kalonymus became a proselyte. The emperor sent a contingent of Roman [soldiers] after him, but he enticed them by [citing] verses from Scripture, and they converted to Judaism. Thereupon the emperor sent another Roman legion after him, bidding them not to say anything to him. As they were about to take him away with them, he said to them: “Let me tell you just an ordinary thing: [In a procession] the torch lighter carries the light in front of the torch bearer, the torch bearer in front of the leader, the leader in front of the governor, the governor in front of the chief officer. But does the chief officer carry the light in front of the people?” “No!” they replied. He said, “But the Holy One, blessed be He, carries the light before Israel, for Scripture says: ‘The L-RD went before them... in a pillar of fire to give them light’ [Exodus 13:21].” Then they also converted. Again [the emperor] sent another legion, ordering them not to enter into any conversation whatsoever with him. So they took hold of him, and as they were walking he saw a mezuzah that was fixed on a doorframe. He placed his hand on it, saying to them: “Now what is this?” and they replied: “You tell us.” He said, “According to universal custom, the mortal king dwells within while his servants keep guard outside. Yet with the Holy One, blessed be He, it is His servants who dwell within while He keeps guard outside, as it is said: ‘The L-RD will guard your departure and your arrival, from this time and forever [Psalms 121:8].’” Then they also converted to Judaism. [The emperor] no longer summoned him.

– Avodah Zarah 11a