

CHAPTER 7, VERSE 15

by Rabbi Dovid Siegel

(7:14)

"And what will be caught in the ban shall be burned in fire - he and all that is his, because he transgressed Hashem's covenant and did an abomination in Israel."

Rashi notes the awkward wording of this passage and comments that, in truth, Achan was stoned rather than burned. Rashi therefore explains that this passage refers to numerous consequences of Achan's violation. Hashem instructed the Jewish people to burn Achan's tent and general possessions, but Achan himself was awaiting a more severe response, soon to be disclosed. Apparently, Hashem wanted the Jewish people to sense the severity of this offense and to respond to it accordingly.

Our Sages, indeed, reveal some of the unspoken language of this passage. They focus on the double expression in this passage - transgression and abomination - and explain that Achan was punished for additional offenses he had committed. They interpret the words *"Hashem's covenant"* to refer to the covenant of circumcision and explain that Achan sought to physically conceal his sacred covenant of circumcision. In addition, they interpret the word *"abomination"* to refer to the outrageous crime of forbidden relations with a betrothed maiden. They differ in opinion whether Achan actually committed that horrible act or was held responsible for one tantamount to it (see Mesichta Sanhedrin 44a). These comments are quite puzzling to us. The Jewish people fell in war because Achan violated the ban, not because of he denied his circumcision or engaged in forbidden relations. The people, because of their tolerance, were commanded to remove the forbidden items from their midst and to punish the perpetrator of that theft. Why were they informed here of Achan's other sins, and why were they given the task of punishing him for seemingly unrelated offenses?

We conclude from this that Achan's act was apparently far greater than a mere act of trespassing. Let us refer back to Yehoshua's original warning to the people not to violate the ban. Yehoshua said, *"But guard yourselves from the ban, lest you destroy yourselves by partaking of the banned items thereby rendering the Jewish camp devastated and you will spoil it"* (6:18).

The Jewish nation was warned from the outset about the severe collective effect of violating the ban. They understood that any individual's violation meant jeopardizing the entire nation. Weren't they forewarned that that this crime would spoil the entire Jewish camp and deliver it a devastating blow? After such stern words, who would dare play with this potential fireball?!

This then is the attitude Hashem expected the Jewish people to adopt. However, they didn't display total sensitivity to the subject, and Achan's act slipped through the cracks. Radak explains (ad loc) that the Jewish nation failed to organize a security system to ensure that no violation would occur. Now that it happened, the entire nation was faulted for their laxity in the matter. Their atonement for their part in this act was to recognize the full ramifications of Achan's offense. Hashem expected the people to view this isolated act through a clear Torah perspective and to understand the total picture. Achan's willingness to ignore the severe consequences of his action reflected major inner faults. He certainly realized the pending retribution to the entire nation but was apparently not concerned about it. Evidently, he didn't cherish Hashem's close relationship with him or with the rest of the people, and was, on some level, willing to jeopardize it. His violation meant, in essence, the denial of his circumcision that represents Hashem's inseparable relationship with His people.

However, Achan's atrocity extended much further than that. Hashem responded to Achan's act and informed His people, *"I will not continue being together with you!"* Hashem announced that Achan's offense "forces" Him to sever His relationship with His people. In this vein, Achan's act is truly comparable to the interference in a perfect marital relationship. The Jewish people entered the land with Hashem's open display of miracles on their behalf. The Jordan split and the walls of Yericho came crashing down, clearly displaying to all Canaanites Hashem's appreciation for His people. But moments later Hashem deserted them and displayed serious disturbance over their actions. In addition to his breach of contract, Achan's act portrayed the Jewish people as disloyal and ungrateful. Is this the way to treat Hashem's possessions after His recent display of affection towards you?!

We now understand the hidden meaning of the adulterous status given to Achan's act. Rashi sheds light on our Sages' words and explains that aside from the severe sin of forbidden relations, one commits two additional offenses when involved with a betrothed maiden. He destroys her relationship with her husband and brings untold shame to the household to which she identifies until her marriage is consummated. Achan, in practice and/or in theory, was guilty of all of the above. He partook of that which didn't belong to him, jeopardized and temporarily destroyed Hashem's relationship with His people and brought them untold shame for allowing this atrocity to occur.

Hashem instructed the Jewish people to cleanse themselves from their indifferent attitude towards the violation of the ban and its related connotations. They were commanded to view Achan as a criminal of the highest degree rather than a simple thief. The Torah gives specific direction regarding an adulterer and states, *"And destroy the evil from your midst!"* (D'varim 22:25). This, then, became the Jewish people's responsibility: to remove the adulterer from their midst. For this reason they were informed of the severity of Achan's offense in practice and/or in principle. After this introduction they would seriously concentrate on these issues. And, when stoning Achan with the above in mind, they would truly rid themselves of any Achan's influence in all of its spheres.

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Kollel Toras Chesed of Skokie
3732 West Dempster
Skokie, Illinois 60076
Phone: 847-674-7959 Fax: 847-674-4023
E-mail: kollel@arlin.net
