

# JOINT CUSTODY OF SIN

*by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein*

*Say to the kohanim, the sons of Aharon, and say to them, each of you shall not become tameh to a dead person among his people.*

Be'er Mayim Chaim: We already understand the halachic importance of repeating the instruction "speak" within the space of a few words. The Torah wishes to "warn" according to Chazal<sup>2</sup> "the adults regarding the children." In other words, Moshe instructed not only all the kohanim above the age of legal responsibility, but commanded them about the children as well, and to ensure that even minors would not be forced to violate the tumah-prohibitions of the kehunah.

The Torah speaks on many planes, however, and we can offer another explanation for the doubled verb. R. Tarfon taught,<sup>3</sup> "There is no proper rebuke in this generation. When a person (noting some unseemly behavior in his friend, and chastising him for it, as the Torah commands) says to his fellow, 'Remove the splinter from between your eyes,' the other responds, 'Remove the beam from between yours!'" In other words, the one to whom the rebuke is addressed deflects the criticism by arguing that the rebuker is guilty of worse than he! While the person addressed may be guilty of minor sins - the splinter - the rebuker lugs around an entire beam.

Now surely in a generation of sinners, some would-be rebukers are hoisted by their own petards, and shown to be greater transgressors. But would there not be many attempts at rebuke by those on more or less an equivalent moral footing? Why does R. Tarfon see a common opportunity for the rebukee to point to the rebuker's beam relative to his own splinter?

Crucial to understanding R. Tarfon's point is understanding just how interconnected Jews are to each other. The Jewish nation functions as an integrated organism - a single body. When any part of it is hurt or pained or diminished spiritually, all of it is affected - whether the people feel the consequences or not. While the organs of the body have their separate functions, they are all part of a single dynamic system. What goes on in the head can affect the heel - the most remote part of the foot. The opposite is true as well. An injury to the foot will communicate itself to the head.

The upshot of this is that the transgressions of the common people impact upon the nasi, the head of the nation, simply because of their mutual connection and interdependence. The nasi fails some spiritual test because some part of the spiritual poison of the lowliest in Israel is transmitted to him.

You will find another hint to this concept at the beginning of Parshas Ekev. "Because/ekev you will

listen to these chukim...Hashem will bless you." <sup>4</sup> Ekev also means heel. The great blessings that the Torah promises for compliance with Hashem's wishes cannot fully vest in the people until full observance spreads to even the heel, the lowliest of the nation. The fullness of His berachah needs a perfected place to which it can attach itself. When the heel is imperfect, some of that imperfection spreads to all other parts of the Torah nation - even the heads.

Frequently, someone of supposedly sterling qualities is the one to rebuke. Most often, he will not be guilty of the transgression about which he rebukes the common man. This would situate him in a good place to offer rebuke without engendering a cynical charge of hypocrisy. Yet R. Tarfon reports that their dialogue goes something like this:

Great person: "We are all interconnected. Your active sin has trickled up to my level, and turned into splinter. It is nothing like your greater, active aveirah, but it has caused within me a smaller sin, a splinter, by sinning at least in my mind. This is all your fault. This splinter, this small sin, is sourced in you - between your eyes."

Lesser person: "The arrow points in both directions. You may not be guilty of an active sin, but your record is not perfect in its own right. You have independently sinned in small ways, especially through thought, and those sins have trickled down to me. Your small sins ramified all over the body of the Jewish nation. In my case, they helped me to stumble in far more substantial ways. You are partially to blame for the great beam of my sins. It is sourced in you - from between your eyes!"

We return to our pasuk, to find all this at work. The kohen is the symbol of enhanced, perfected avodah. Our pasuk speaks of two kinds of exhortations to the kohanim, each significant. First, they are addressed as the bnei Aharon. They are urged to keep the mighty trust placed in them, and act scrupulously in carrying out their responsibilities. Next, they are warned that any failure on their part is not only tragic in and of itself, but it will impact upon others. Thus, lenefesh lo yitamah b'amav. "Your indiscretion will be a source of contamination for the common people, the am. Relative to them, you are the neshamah of the people, the thought-soul. They serve as the nefesh, the action-soul. See to it that you do not stain their. When your neshamah is not completely in order, it will cause them to stumble in the arena of overt action.

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Sources: 1. Based on Be'er Mayim Chaim, Vayikra 21:1  
2. Yevamos 114A  
3. Arachin 16B  
4. Devarim 7:12-13

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