

HOW BAD DOES IT GET?

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

A man, when he offers a korban to Hashem from among you...

Be'er Yosef: The Tanchuma reflects on the word "man" in this pasuk. Rather than employ ish to designate the sinner, the Torah chose adam. The word was chosen so that we would make the association with Adam/ adam ha-rishon. We are to understand that when a person sins like Adam himself, he should bring the appropriate offering. We don't immediately understand the Tanchuma's point. Hashem makes it quite clear that He commands the sinner to bring his korban. We shouldn't require any more encouragement than that. What do we have to gain by remembering that Adam as well brought a korban for his misdeed?

We have been taught that it is teshuvah that really makes the korban. The sense of regret that the sinner feels owes to his recognition of the harm he has inflicted upon his soul through his misbehavior, and the damage he has done to himself, his children, and to all of creation.

Adam provides the perfect object lesson in the consequences of sin. In a single moment of sin, he brought upon himself and all who followed the horrors of death. As if that were not enough, Adam ruined the quality of all life before death claims its inevitable victims. What could have been an idyllic, contemplative life turned in a moment to the eternal rat-race of seeking a livelihood. The tranquility of life spent in the presence of Hashem turned into an arduous pursuit of the means to survive.

Such is the power of chet.

A person might object that Adam's sin was unlike any other, and therefore far more serious. He was the first to break away from complete obedience to Hashem's will; his korban was therefore different from all others.

Chazal, however, disagree. The Sifra² argues that Adam can teach us about the great reward awaiting the righteous. We contemplate in shock and dismay the ruination visited upon the world by Adam's single aveirah - his disregarding of the one prohibition that had been given to him. What we see should give us hope and support, says the Sifra. We constantly affirm that the consequences of the exercise of Hashem's midos of good far and away exceed the consequences of the operation of His punitive midah. If Adam's sin had such catastrophic effect, continues the Sifra, imagine the reward waiting for us, who curtail our actions in response to the plethora of prohibitions He later

commanded! Now, implicit in this kal v'chomer is that Adam's sin was not a special case! Chazal compare every opportunity to obey and disobey His mitzvos to that first sin, ignoring the arguments that make it a special case.

Chazal understood what is not so obvious to us. We see Adam's sin as unique, and satisfy ourselves of the justice in the devastation that ensued from it. This is a mistake. In truth, every chet that followed Adam's shares in the enormity of its destructiveness. The Torah deals with Adam's transgression at length, not because it was unique, but simply because it was the first. Every person who violates any transgression should see himself as causing comparable harm to the very first sin of Adam.

Nefesh ha-Chaim³ ponders the role of the single individual. Let him not doubt his own power, thinking "what can an undistinguished person like me do through my lowly and unremarkable actions?" Every action, every word, every thought leaves its mark, says R Chaim Volozhin. Nothing is lost. All of them are keyed to great processes in the upper worlds, and affect the Divine lights that emanate from there. Indeed, each simple Jew should be seized with terror at the thought of the devastation he can wreak through aveirah! We live in the aftermath of the enormous destruction wrought by Nevuchadnetzer and Titus, who despoiled the batei mikdash. Yet there were places that their sins and violence could not reach. It is only the mitzvah-activity assigned to the Jewish nation that directly impacts the spiritual worlds. In a sense, we are responsible for levels of destructiveness that Nevuchadnetzer and Titus could never bring about!

This, then, is the bonus lesson in our pasuk. When a person determines to repent for some misdeed, he should think of Adam. He should contemplate the far-reaching effects of a single, isolated aveirah, and realize that he is guilty of something very similar.

The remorse that he will feel will be a helpful component of his teshuvah process.

Sources:

1. Based on Be'er Yosef, Vayikra 1:2
 2. Cited by Rashi 5:17
 3. Nefesh ha-Chaim 1:4
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