

TRICKLE-DOWN AVEIROS

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

Say to the Kohanim, the sons of Aharon and say to them: Each of you shall not contaminate himself to a person among his people.

Be'er Mayim Chaim: The repetition of the verb – “say...and say to them” – suggests that two related but somewhat different messages are to be conveyed. We will offer one suggestion based on the gemara's^[2] dismal concession that rebuking people for their shortcomings was no longer working in its day as it should. “If a person tells his friend, ‘Remove the splinter from between your eyes,’ the friend counters with ‘Remove the beam from between yours!’”

We will start with a deeper appreciation of a *pasuk* we passed a few weeks ago: “If the anointed Kohen sins, *le-ashmas ha-am*.”^[3] While this is usually translated as “bringing guilt upon the people,” more literally it means, “according to the guilt of the people.” The Kohen Gadol, the leader of the people, sometimes sins according to the guilt of the people. The direction of guilt sometimes works in the reverse direction, as we shall see.

Standing behind all of this is the fact that we are all interconnected and intertwined. The Jewish people are like one body. When one part of it is afflicted, all parts feel the effects. Within the people, some are like the head, while others are like the feet, the lowest point. The *pasuk* about the Kohen Gadol can be taken to mean that when the people sin, their transgression reaches the heads, the leaders of the people, who are symbolized by the Kohen Gadol.

A *pasuk* in Devarim^[4] alludes to this. “When *ekev* you shall listen...and you observe and perform...He will love you, bless you, and multiply you.” *Ekev* means “heel.” On the level of plain meaning, the verse speaks of a consequence, as the heel follows the body. As a consequence of obeying the Torah, Hashem will bring all kinds of blessing. But the unusual word *ekev* taken more literally tells us that we merit the *berachah* only when the lowliest members of the nation also heed the demands of the Torah, meaning those people who can be seen as the heel, the lowest point on the body of the collective.

The head-to-toe relationship works as follows. When the ordinary people sin, it will leave its mark on the leaders. Somehow, they will also be implicated. They, too, will fall prey to transgression, but in a very different way. The full-blown sin of the common people drags down the leaders enough that they sin through thoughts of sin, even though they do not act out those thoughts.

Conversely, when the leaders sin – even ever-so-slightly, like sinning only in thought but not deed –

that sin will impact upon the rest of the nation, moving some to active transgression.

This explains the repartee reported in Arachin. One of the generation's leaders tells a commoner, "Remove the splinter from between your eyes." He complains of the small *aveirah* that troubles him. It is small because he has successfully resisted transgressing in deed. He has, however, succumbed in thought. He tells the commoner that this splinter, this small *aveirah*, is sourced "between your eyes," meaning that it is sourced in the major transgressions of the common people that impact negatively on the spiritual position of the *tzadik*. You are the reason, the *tzadik* tells the commoner, that I have become vulnerable, a target of the allure of the *yetzer hora*.

The conversation then turns around. The commoner responds, "I, too, will complain about your role in my downfall. Relative to your transgression of a splinter, mine is a full-blown beam. My *aveirah* is committed in the full sense, not just in thought. But were it not for your indiscretion – your *aveirah* committed at least in thought – I would not have committed an active sin. We are apparently linked together."

We return to our *pasuk*, with its doubling of the word "say." The Kohanim are those who serve Hashem in a more active, immediate manner than the rest of the people. The Torah instructs them to avoid contaminating themselves. It speaks to them on two levels, indicated by the two uses of "say." First, they are warned not to directly contaminate themselves through anything impure. Next, they are commanded to avoid any contamination because of the effect that their *tumah* will have "on his people." Any slight contamination/ *aveirah* will redound to the rest of the people, making them vulnerable to far greater shortcomings.

[1] Based on Be'er Mayim Chaim, Vayikra 21:1

[2] Arachin 16B

[3] Vayikra 4:3

[4] Devarim 7:12-13