

# ASSESSING THE DAMAGE

*by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein*

*When a man among you brings a korban to Hashem...*

Be'er Yosef: A passage in the Tanchuma observes that our pasuk uses the word adam for "man" rather than the more common ish. The reason, explains the midrash, is to impress upon us a lesson from Adam Ha-Rishon's playbook. When a person sins, says the Tanchuma, he should bring a korban, just as Adam did when he became the first to sin.

This is puzzling, however. We have a rich halachic literature that specifies all the myriad requirements of the various korbanos. Adam's example adds nothing to our obedience of the Law! We offer korbanos because we are commanded to do so, not because of anything that Adam did.

We will understand the Tanchuma's point if we remember that the korbanos of our parshah are related to teshuvah for sin. Teshuvah, in turn, is predicated upon remorse, and remorse flows from comprehending the enormity of our sin, and the great harm that it causes.

How are we to understand the effects and consequences of our sins, since we so often do not get to see them directly? Here is where the example of Adam can help. His single misstep brought Man to death's doorstep, and burdened him with the need to seek his sustenance laboriously. No two factors have mired us in misery as much as our preoccupation with death and with earning our way to survival! Adam's example dramatically illustrates the consequences of sin, because they had enormous visible impact.

We might object, however, that Adam's sin was a special case, and cannot teach us anything relevant to our own lives. As the very first transgression, it brought unusual consequences, not at all comparable to what we produce by our sins. But know that such thinking runs counter to the teaching of Chazal! The Sifra<sup>2</sup> points to Adam's punishment for the violation of a single sin, arguing that we, commanded in so many more mitzvos, have even more opportunity for destructiveness - as well as greater opportunity for constructive activity and reward. Clearly Chazal held that Adam was no special case; what happened to him serves as a warning to everyone else, thousands of years after the first sin and many others. The Torah details the consequences of his chet not because it was unique and treated different, but so that it should serve as a teachable moment for the rest of us.

The words of R Chaim Volozhin<sup>3</sup> are sobering: "A person should not say to himself, 'What am I?'

What power do my pedestrian actions have to leave any mark on the world?' Know, however, that all the fine points of a person's actions, words and thoughts are never lost. Every one of these rises heavenward, attracted there by its individual shoresh/ root in the world of ruchaniyos. In truth, the person wise enough to understand this properly will tremble in contemplating his imperfect acts - how a small sin can destroy and ruin more destructively than Nevuchadnetzar and Titus. (The latter could not cause the slightest perturbation above, because they had no share or root in the upper worlds.)"

This, then, is the point made by the Tanchuma. A person should take Adam as an object lesson. His sin is a much better source for that lesson than anyone else's. In examining Adam's crime and punishment, we readily see the effects of sin, something that is not always so apparent. If we make the effort, we can understand that our own actions are equally damaging, even if we cannot immediately see their impact. But we can be aware that the dramatic transformation of life after Adam's sin owes to a tight relationship between the spiritual and physical worlds. That relationship remains in full force, and allows us as well to become either builders of worlds or destroyers. When we bring a korban for a chet, we should do so with Adam's example in mind.

---

Sources:

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