

SINS OF GREATNESS

by Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky

This week the Torah teaches us about sins and offerings. It tells us about how a human is supposed to respond to misdeeds. It tells us about all types of people who make mistakes and sin. High Priests and princes as well as simple Jews are subject to failures and so, in addition to penitence, each sinner on every level must bring an offering.

When referring to the average sinner the Torah teaches the halacha by beginning the laws with the words, "If a man shall sin" or "when a man shall sin." It uses the Hebrew word "im," (Leviticus 4:27) or "ki" (Leviticus 5:21). However when it comes to "a prince amongst the tribes" who is the sinner, the Torah uses a different expression. It does not use the standard words for if and when, rather it uses a totally different expression "asher."

"Asher nasi yecheta -- if that a prince sins, and commits one from among all the commandments of Hashem that may not be done -- unintentionally -- and becomes guilty" (Leviticus 4:22).

The word asher, is quite similar in fact to the word "ashre," It means praiseworthy. That point is not lost on the Talmudic sages. Rashi quotes the Sifra, "If that a prince hath sinned: The word "Asher" is connected in meaning with "Ashrei" which means praiseworthy. The verse implies the following connotation: Praiseworthy and fortunate is the generation whose prince (king) takes care to bring an atonement sacrifice even for his inadvertent misdeeds."

That is surely praiseworthy, especially to those of us who live in a generation pock-marked with scandals of denials and cover-ups. But if that is the case, why not use the term "asher" in reference to the bringing of his penitence, not referring to the sin itself? Isn't it the admission of guilt that merits praise, not the actual misdeed? There are many variations to this story. The basic premise, however, is well known.

In the city of B'nai Beraq there are many Bar Mitzvah celebrations every Shabbos. It became very difficult for Rav Yaakov Yisrael Kanievski, the elder sage known to world Jewry as the Steipler Gaon to attend every Bar Mitzvah. In fact, he was old and weak and hardly had the strength to go to shul. One week, a Bar Mitzvah boy was honored with the maftir. Immediately after the davening, the Steipler Gaon was standing there in line, waiting to wish him Mazal Tov.

The Steipler Gaon bent down and began conversing in earnest with the neophyte member of the adult Jewish community. It seemed to the hushed crowd that this was much more than a

perfunctory Mazel Tov wish.

The boy paled as he shook his head several times in amazement. "Of course, Rebbe!" he exclaimed. "Of course! There is no question. I feel terrible that the Rebbe felt he had to discuss this with me!"

The Steipler thanked the young boy, wished him Mazel Tov again, blessed him, and left the shul.

The entire congregation was shocked. What could the Steipler have wanted?

"Let me explain," began the boy. "Six years ago I was davening in this shul with a very large siddur (prayer book). The Steipler approached me and chided me for learning Gemara in the middle of the Tefilah. I showed him that it was a Siddur and that I actually was davening. He apologized and left.

Today the Steipler came to my Bar Mitzvah and reminded me of the story. He explained to me that even though he apologized for his mistaken reprimand six years ago, it was not enough. Since, at the time, I was a child under Bar Mitzvah, I did not have the frame of mind to truly forgive him. Even if I did forgive him, it had no halachic validity. The Steipler found out when my birthday was and waited for six years until my Bar Mitzvah. Today, I am halachically old enough to forgive him, and so, he came back today to ask my forgiveness!"

Sometimes the praise of our leaders is not the fact that they bring a sin offering, but rather in the entire sin and absolution process. It is important for us to understand, not only that they ask forgiveness, but what they did wrong and how they rectified their misdeed. We are praiseworthy when we have leaders that understand what is considered wrong, and openly teach us through their actions how to respond. When the process is comprehensive, then the combination of the mistake and the absolution can be considered praiseworthy, for they are acts we can all learn from.

Good Shabbos!

Dedicated by Ira & Gisele Beer in memory of Harry Beer and Tillie Beer
R' Tzvi Mendel ben R' Pinchus
Chaya Yova Bas R' Eliyahu

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