

ACTIONS RIPPLE ACROSS THE MASSES

by Rabbi Yaakov Menken

"G-d said to Moses, 'Speak to the priests, the sons of Aaron, and say to them that they should not become impure for a person among their people.'" [21:1]

This verse instructs the Kohanim, the priests, not to come into contact with a dead body, or otherwise acquire the associated impurity - for example, by being in the same building or entering a graveyard. There are certain exceptions, but the general rule is presented here.

I spent the early part of this week at the convention of the Association for Jewish Outreach Professionals, an organization for those whose work is devoted to enhancing Jewish education and identity (yes, Project Genesis fits right in). Away from my books, I was searching for something appropriate for this week's message, and received immediate help from Rabbi Michel Twerski, founder and director of the Torah Institute of Milwaukee (I hope that readers there are aware that this scholar and teacher is available to them; he is a tremendous resource and uniquely warm individual). He offered a Chassidic drasha on the above verse from the Be'er Mayim Chaim, which is (excusing myself for any errors in transmission) as follows:

The Talmud says that many students of Rebbe Akiva had reached such a level of spiritual greatness that the Shechina, the Divine Presence, should have rested upon them as it did upon Moses himself. Why did this not occur? Because their generation did not deserve this honor.

The obvious question is one of "fairness." If a particular individual is deserving of greatness, then why should it matter what everyone else is or is not doing? But the answer is contained in the principle that *"Kol Yisrael Areivim zeh bazeh"* - all Jews are inter-mingled, even responsible for each other. The Jewish people operates as an inter-connected unit. A generation has truly holy men and women, other scholarly individuals, "the masses," and an unfortunate few who are genuinely devoted to misbehavior. But even these lowest individuals create a "ripple effect" which is felt up the line. Thus those at the highest levels of spiritual greatness may not be able to maintain the necessary degree of pure concentration to merit the Divine Presence. It is indeed a lack within the individual, but it stems from the rest of the generation.

The Be'er Mayim Chayim tells us that this works in the opposite direction as well - and in this case, the ripples grow into waves. If the leaders slip, and even have inappropriate thoughts, these can

grow into terrible actions on the part of those individuals most distant from G-dly pursuits. All the more so, must leaders recognize that their words and actions can have ramifications down the line which they might never have imagined possible.

This is what the verse says: "speak to the priests," the leaders of the people, those who stand at its head, and tell them "that they should not become impure for a person among their people," that they should not do or even think the most minor impure thing, which could be realized in full measure by a person among their people, well down the line.

Thus all of us must learn to purify ourselves, to pursue that which is good and G-dly, and encourage the good and the pure within others as well.

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