

OUT-PIETIZING THE REST

by Rabbi Yaakov Menken

"And on the eighth day of the purification of an individual afflicted with Tza'aras, he will take two unblemished sheep and one unblemished year-old ewe... and if he is poor and cannot afford this, then he will take one sheep... and two pigeons or two doves, which he can afford..."
[14:10, 21-22]

The Chofetz Chaim, Rabbi Yisrael Meyer Kagan, derives an important lesson from the unusual "cost reduction" offered to the poor person afflicted with Tza'aras (often translated as leprosy, this was a spiritual affliction not seen today). We know that there are people who learn and pray, and think to themselves that even if they are not devoting themselves properly to these activities, at least they are doing a better job than their friends and neighbors.

These people forget, says the Chofetz Chaim, that they are quite likely "wealthy in knowledge." One who is poor can bring two pigeons or doves, but a wealthy person who does likewise does not fulfill his obligations! Similarly, he says, one who better understands and appreciates the value of study and prayer is obligated to conduct him or herself accordingly.

This is a lesson with tremendous implications. Recently, a woman said that she might want to try to keep kosher, but she wondered how she could do so without "looking down" on all the Jews today who don't keep this Mitzvah. She is not alone: a Jewish writer said not long ago that those who keep "Glatt" Kosher, a strict standard of Kashrus, are simply trying to "out-pietize" the rest of the Jewish world! One can only hope that our readers who do maintain Glatt Kosher cringe at the very thought (and my apologies to those who did).

The Chofetz Chaim provides the answer: Jews don't believe in "comparative religion," if you can excuse the pun. Because every person comes from a unique background and faces a unique set of circumstances, the identical response, the identical involvement with Mitzvos and spiritual endeavors, could be judged a phenomenal success by one individual, and a complete failure by another.

If one appreciates a Mitzvah as a tool for spiritual development, then one should grasp hold of it. This applies also to a "hidur Mitzvah", performance of the same Mitzvah in a "beautiful," more intense and dedicated way - we have an obligation to sanctify ourselves and our lives by making special

efforts, and if one such effort is Glatt Kosher, then so be it. To follow that drive is praiseworthy, and can only be harmful when it leads to an internal imbalance in a person's Jewish life, which is why consultation with teachers and friends is not merely encouraged, but necessary. But the fact that others do not do likewise is not, **cannot** mean that one looks down upon them! After all, it could be that what is appropriate for one person would lead to that imbalance in someone else.

To whatever extent we are guilty of judging others, let us clean it from our hearts as thoroughly as a Glatt-nik works to remove the chometz [leaven] before Pesach!

Good Shabbos!

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