

THE VALUE OF GOOD ADVICE

by Rabbi Yaakov Menken

"And should the entire Congregation of Israel make an error, and should something be hidden from the eyes of the congregation, and they should do one of the Commandments of HaShem which must not be done, and they be guilty; when the sin becomes known, the transgression which they did -- then the Congregation shall bring a young bull for a sin-offering, and they shall bring it before the Tent of Meeting." [4:13-14]

How is it possible for the entire Congregation to transgress as a unit? Rashi explains that "the Congregation of Israel" refers to the Sanhedrin, the Supreme Religious Court which sat in Jerusalem, in the Temple. The Sifsei Chachamim elaborates -- in Numbers 35:24, the Torah says "the Congregation shall judge." Just as the reference there is to the Court, so too here; and since it is the Congregation/Court "of Israel," this refers to the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem.

In other words, the Sanhedrin itself made a mistake. They told people they could do a particular action, and later concluded that they had instructed the Nation of Israel to violate the Torah.

It is surely more comfortable to believe that our leaders are infallible, yet the Torah likes to concentrate on human error. It barely begins discussing the idea of making an offering to HaShem, a sacrifice, when it turns to sacrifices made when one violates a prohibition through negligence. And even before discussing what a regular, individual Jew should do, the Torah tells us about mistakes made by the High Priest, the Sanhedrin, or by a Nasi, leader of a tribe. The message is extremely clear: don't expect perfection. You won't get it.

How can it be, then, that we are told in Deut. 17:9 to turn to our Judges in order that they should tell us the law -- and that we should do exactly as they say, and not turn aside from it?

The answer is very simple, yet it is one that we often seem to have forgotten: I do not need to believe that someone is perfect, in order to conclude that he or she will exhibit better judgment than I. I can respect authority and wisdom, and do so without surrendering my individuality or my own judgment, even while acknowledging that no one is perfect. And even if I disagree with the advice, it may still make perfect sense for me to follow it, if I consider the "track record" of the person giving the advice and those who have followed it. "Fools learn from their own mistakes; the wise learn from the mistakes of others."

Concerning the Torah and its Laws, HaShem tells us that not even the Sanhedrin is perfect. There is no guarantee that it will not make mistakes, and on the contrary, the Torah provides a mechanism

for the Sanhedrin to compensate for an error. And nonetheless -- we are to seek the Sanhedrin's judgment, and follow its instructions. There is no contradiction, simply because the Sanhedrin is less likely to make an error than any individual.

In all areas of life, we should look for wise counsel, and weigh our own opinions only against their wisdom. Obviously there are a host of decisions which only we can make -- but nonetheless, let us appreciate the value of good advice!