

MIXING IN THE BAD

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

You shall not continue to bring a worthless minchah. Incense is an abomination to Me....I can't abide falsehood and assembly of your Rosh Chodesh and Yom Tov].

Meshech Chochmah: Ironically, sometimes a bit of bad is a good thing! Chazal^[2] emphasize that a public fast day that does not attract the participation of sinners just does not have the clout of a proper fast day. They derive this from the composition of the *ketores*, which included by design *chelvanah*. While foul-smelling on its own, it took on a different characteristic when mixed with the aromatic spices that went into the *ketores*. There, the majority ingredients not only masked the bad odor, but were themselves improved by the minority ingredient that brought out some of the more subtle qualities of their aroma.

So it is with people and their faults. When three people are scrutinized as individuals, the shortcomings of each one stand out. One is found to be stingy, a second evil-tongued, a third quick to anger. When the three form a group, the majority bring out better qualities in the minority, and the minority can even at times enhance the quality of their positive traits. The stingy one learns generosity from the others; the foul-tongued learns to keep silent; the quick-tempered discovers forbearance.

However, the opposite can also occur. The majority can decide to emulate the base characteristics of the minority, thereby strengthening them. For this reason, Chazal^[3] maintain that it is better when evildoers are scattered, rather than joined together.

This fundamental idea allows us to understand the workings of the *mikdash*, which served to unite the hearts of all of *Klal Yisrael*, bringing them together to a single place. Miracles were a common occurrence there. While any one individual did not usually merit miraculous intervention, the community created by those individuals did merit such miracles. The deficiencies of each individual were erased in the group, as the majority brought out the latent good in the previously offensive minority. The collective possesses qualities that the individual rarely can lay claim to himself. One person contributes *yir'as Shomayim*, another *ahavas Yisrael*. One excels in his generosity, another in his Torah.

Individuals can bring a *minchah*; it cannot be brought by partners sharing it. Nonetheless, the community does bring a *minchah*, as in the *omer* offering on the second day of Pesach and the two loaves that are brought on Shavuot. A communal offering is treated not as a partnership of all the

individuals in the group, but as a single corporate entity. This treatment, however, is reasonable only so long as the whole becomes greater than the sum of its parts, i.e., where individuals engage each other positively, and the group bringing out latent goodness which was not expressed while they acted as distinct individuals. When this dynamic fails – when individuals no longer are drawn by the positive characteristics of their neighbors – their group *korban* becomes a shared partnership, rather than a single corporate entity. Since the *minchah* may not be brought in partnership, Yeshaya decries the *minchah* of his countrymen, who did not improve in each other's company, but each person attempted to devour the other. Such a *minchah* he terms a "worthless" one. It flies in the face of the halachic requirement that the *minchah* come from a single, unifying entity.

Similarly, *ketores* in such a society becomes an "abomination." The putrid component of the incense remains putrid when it does not collaborate with all the other elements that cooperatively produce a new, better fragrance. Its abiding stench makes the *ketores* "abominable."

We can generally tease out passive and active ways in which people are able to rebuke their friends for their misdeeds. In the passive mode, no words need be exchanged. A sinner takes notice of one of his peers – one, perhaps, who faces even greater hardships than he does – acting in an exemplary manner. If the observer is open to change, he will take his example to heart. "If even he can act in such and such a way, all the more so should I be able to do that!"

Not peers, but leaders and greats use the active mode. Here, it is the very difference in station that is effective. When the sinner respects the speaker for his knowledge or piety, his words find room in the sinner's heart.

The gemara^[4] states that Yerushalayim was destroyed because people did not rebuke each other. Developing the thought further, it cites the *pasuk*^[5] "Her leaders were like sheep," and explains that sheep walk with the head of one right up against the tail of another. The gemara refers to the passive mode of rebuke and influence, and why it did not function in the generation of the destruction. Rather than look to the "heads" of the other sheep, i.e. to emulate their exemplary qualities, people buried their heads in the deficiencies of their friends. There, they would find support for their own deficiencies, and excuses to maintain their own mediocrity rather than work on themselves to improve their character.

The active mode of rebuke did not fare any better. The same passage in the gemara tells us why. "Yerushalayim was destroyed only because they disparaged *talmidei chachamim*." This kind of rebuke presupposes that the listener regards the speaker as a great, accomplished person. The gemara cites a *pasuk*,^[6] "They insulted G-d's *malachim* and scorned His words." *Malachim* can be understood as "messengers," but also in the narrower sense of the Divine messengers we call "angels." The generation of the *churban* could not deny the greatness of their *talmidei chachamim*, so they flipped the argument. "Who are these people to reprimand us? What did they know of the

affairs and challenges of ordinary people? They live like angels, aloof from the issues that everyone else must deal with. If they would have to live like us, they would act far worse than we do!"

Having destroyed both pathways to rebuke, their fate was sealed.

1. Based on Meshech Chochmah, Haftorah of Parshas Devarim (Yeshaya 1:13)
2. Kerisus 6B
3. Sanhedrin 71A
4. Shabbos 119B
5. Eichah 1:6
6. Divrei Ha-Yamim2 36:17