

THE MANY NUANCES OF SIN

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

The K'li Yakar says we can glean some enlightening ideas by carefully examining the words the Torah uses when describing different korbanos chatas (sin-offerings).

Towards the end of parshas Vayikra we learn the halachos (laws) of the sin-offering, which was different depending on who sinned - a regular Jew, a king, and the Kohen Gadol (High Priest). Describing the sin of a regular Jew, the Torah says (4:2) When [Ki] a person sins... By a king, it says (4:22) When [Asher] a ruler sins... And with regard to a Kohen Gadol, the Torah writes (4:3) If [Im] the anointed Kohen sins...

All three variations mean essentially the same thing - if or when something occurs - and to a large extent are used interchangeably by the Torah. Still, every word and nuance of the Torah holds untold significance, all the more so here where the Torah uses three different words that all mean the same thing in a very short span describing identical acts.

Mefarshim write, he says, that the three variations of if/when connote three different levels of likelihood: asher is the most likely (this will happen), followed by ki, and then im (if).

By yet another korban, known as the par he'lam davar shel tzibbur (4:13-21 which is brought when the majority of the nation accidentally commits a specific sin due to a mistaken ruling by the Sanhedrin [High Court]), the Torah also begins with im - if, indicating unlikelihood. It is uncommon for such a thing to happen.

Likewise, regarding the sin-offering of the Kohen Gadol, the Torah begins with im. This is the spiritual leader of K'lal Yisrael. His life, by definition, is dedicated to serving Hashem, to which he spends the bulk of his time in the Beis Ha-mikdash [the Holy Temple], surrounded by kohanim and levi'im performing the holy service, and steeped in ritual, halacha, and spirituality. That such a person in such an environment would sin (a sin offering is brought for inadvertent transgression of a serious matter such as one who mistakenly ate non-kosher meat or forgot it was Shabbos and did work) is surprising (and disturbing) - the Torah rates it as least likely, so to speak.

The sin of the individual, the regular Yid, is more common - it is described with the more likely ki: this will likely happen.

The sin of the king, says the K'li Yakar, begins with asher, when. There is no question, he says, that a person who has been elevated to such a high position will at some point fall prey to the vices of

power and arrogance.

By definition, the king was supposed to cast fear among his subjects and serve as a symbol of honor and splendor. His dress, his throne, his position, the endless servants on standby waiting to do his bidding are all meant to give the impression of great pomp and circumstance. To be sure, the Torah warns that the king should bear in mind that the glory is no more than a façade; that within he should remain humbled before his maker and not let his position get to him. Indeed, the king is the only person who must carry a sefer Torah with him at all times, and read from it, lest his heart be swayed... But the reality is that at some point outward appearances will have an impression on him, and he will sin. (One need only examine the books of the Nevi'im [Prophets] to see that, on the simplest level, even the greatest and most righteous of kings at some point were swayed by the trappings of grandeur and power.)

But there is an anomaly. The Torah returns to the sin of the individual (4:27), and there, instead of the more 'everyday' ki, the Torah uses im - if this will happen, the diction previously reserved for the Kohen Gadol because it implies something unlikely.

The nature of sin is such that while we may at times lose control and commit acts we later regret, it is far more likely for a person to sin in private - when it's between him and Hashem so to speak - than it is for him to sin publically and have to answer for his actions. We know the famous Gemara in which R' Yochanan ben Zakkai told his disciples, "May Hashem grant that your fear of Heaven be akin to your fear of man." But Rebbe, they argued, shouldn't one's fear of G-d be far greater than that of mortals. "True," he answered, "but ha-levai/would it be that you should even reach this level. Look, when the thief steals, what is he thinking? 'I hope no one catches me...'"

The likelihood of sin, the K'li Yakar explains, is directly related to how socially acceptable the sin is, notwithstanding whether Hashem condones it or not. It would be intellectually dishonest to say that our moral antennae receive their feedback solely from the Torah and its laws and guidance. We study the Torah, learn its laws, and hopefully internalize them. But then we (subconsciously) start looking around to see how others - members of our community, people we respect, etc. - deal with the same issues. Where we perceive among our peers diligence and scrupulousness, we are bolstered, and recommit ourselves to the task. But where we experience a lack of commitment among others, we subliminally let ourselves believe that this issue/law/custom is in some way not as critical as others. We may not sin on purpose, or even by accident - but were it to occur, our horrification would not be as profound.

The first time the Torah speaks about a person sinning, where it uses ki connoting likelihood, it says When a person sins... The second time, where the Torah uses im, if, it says If an individual person from among the people of the land shall sin. 'Individual' in this context means he has done something unusual, he committed a sin that is out-of-the-norm (not that there should be any norm when it comes to sin, but such is the reality).

One moral of this story (there are surely many) is this: We do not live in a vacuum. We are influenced by our society, more so by our community. We likewise assert our influence on them.

It is a struggle, to be sure, but the Torah expects us to receive our moral guidance from its elevated counsel, found in the halls and rooms in which it is studied in its purest form. We cannot always close our eyes to what goes on around us, but if we refract everything we see through its prism, we can attain some level of detachment from the baser elements of daily life and move closer to a Torah-true morality. We must also remember that those around us are constantly influenced in the most subtle ways by our actions, and may be learning and assuming things from us (whether good or bad) we might never have imagined.

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