

# THE DOUBLE EDGED SWORD OF MISTAKEN IMPRESSIONS

*by Rabbi Yissocher Frand*

## Parshas Emor

### The Double Edged Sword of Mistaken Impressions

*These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: Tape #723, Is the Kohain Always First? Good Shabbos!*

The Shulchan Aruch rules [Even HaEzer 3:1] that if a stranger comes into shul claiming that he is a Kohain, we do not believe him unless he brings at least one witness to support his claim. The Rama notes that this ruling of Rav Yosef Karo "is not the custom in our communities" and states that since nowadays Kohanim do not eat Terumah, the whole problem of giving a non-Kohain the first aliyah is not significant. In former times, receiving the first aliyah would have been taken as a sign that the individual was entitled to Terumah, which would have been a monetary incentive for him to lie and which could lead to halachic problems. Nowadays, since there is no monetary incentive to lie, we believe him if he says that he is a Kohain. [The Be'er Heitiv raises the question that even nowadays, the Pidyon Haben entitlement is a monetary incentive to lie, but dismisses that question by saying that it is by no means certain that this "fraudulent Kohain" would receive Pidyon Haben money.]

The Chasam Sofer raises another interesting issue. The Torah contains a mitzvah for the Jewish people to single out the priests among them for honor [v'Kidashto]. That is precisely why we reserve the first aliyah for Kohanim. There are many Kohanim in shul who are known to us to certainly be Kohanim. How can we allow this Kohain of doubtful status (in our minds) to take precedence over these "certain Kohanim" and take the first aliyah? A doubt should not preempt a certainty when it comes to fulfillment of the Biblical mitzvah of "v'kidashto" [sanctifying priests]!

The Chasam Sofer answers that if we give this "new Kohain" an Aliyah, even if he is an imposter, we have still fulfilled the mitzvah of v'kidashto. Since we are giving him the aliyah because we think he is a Kohain, that itself -- even if we are wrong about his true identity -- is a fulfillment of the mitzvah of showing honor and giving precedent to Kohanim. The person who lied will need to face the punishment of Heaven; but the Jews who honor him thinking that he is telling the truth, are perfectly justified in doing so and indeed thereby fulfill the mitzvah of v'kidashto.

Rav Pam, zt"l, said that this insight of the Chasam Sofer provides a source of comfort to Torah

scholars who are held in higher esteem by the masses than they really deserve to be held. Deep in the heart of the Torah scholar, he may realize that he is not such a great or pious individual as they are giving him credit for being. However, he may at least take comfort in knowing that those Jews who give him that honor are indeed fulfilling the mitzvah of honoring a Talmid Chochom, just as those Jews who honor the Kohain will get a mitzvah for doing so, even though he is not a Kohain.

We may suspect that Rav Pam was making this comment about himself. He was in fact an outstanding Tzadik and an outstanding Talmid Chochom. However, in his humility, he felt that he people were giving him more honor than he deserved. Nevertheless, he said that he felt relieved by the opinion of the Chasam Sofer, knowing that the honor that he the masses were bestowing on him was at least a mitzvah on their part, even if he was not as great as they thought he was.

Unfortunately, this idea is a double-edged sword. If a Talmid Chochom is measured by the fact that people think he is a Torah scholar and relate to him as one relates to a Torah scholar, there can be a terrible downside as well. The Rambam writes [Yesodei HaTorah 5:11] "And there are other things included in the category of desecration of G-d's Name (Chilul haShem), namely, actions by a great man renowned for his piety which cause others to murmur about him. Even though they are not sins, such a person has desecrated G-d's Name."

People expect more from a Talmid Chochom. If the Talmid Chochom does not live up to those explanations, it is a Chilul HaShem, even if strictly speaking, he has not violated a Torah law. The Rambam cites several examples (based on the Gemara in Yoma 86a), such as a person who buys on credit and does not pay up when he is supposed to, or one who is overly frivolous, or one who fraternizes at parties with ignoramuses, or speaks curtly to his fellow man, or does not greet them with a nice smile. None of these practices is forbidden per se, however for a Talmid Chochom to do them still causes Chilul haShem.

A person might think or say, "I am not such a big Talmid Chochom. These standards, which the Rambam applies to a "great man of piety" do not apply to me! Here, the Chasam Sofer's insight works in the opposite direction. If people think that a person is a Talmid Chochom and expect behavior from that individual that is appropriate for a Talmid Chochom, then even if in reality, they are wrong and he is not a Talmid Chochom, he still may be in violation of Chilul haShem by not living up to their (mistaken) expectations.

The Rambam continues that conversely. If someone who is viewed as a Torah scholar is meticulous to speak nicely with his fellow man and greet everyone pleasantly and is faithful in all his business dealings, and conducts himself in a manner beyond reproach in all his actions, such that he earns praise and love of his fellow man, such a person has Sanctified G-d's Name and about him, Scripture writes, "You are My Servant Israel, through whom I will be glorified." [Yeshaya 49:3]

I would like to share a true story related to this concept, involving Harold Willner, a member of the Baltimore community. It is a beautiful story illustrating how it is possible to make a Kiddush haShem

in the most unlikely of circumstances.

Harold told me that he was flying from Boston to Vermont. As is required nowadays, Harold removed his shoes and put them in the container that goes through the metal detector. Harold then experienced the nightmare that everyone prays will not occur. Someone else at the other end of the conveyor belt mistakenly took Harold's shoes. Harold found a pair of shoes at the other side of the conveyor belt but the fellow who left those shoes was a size 7 and Mr. Willner could not fit into size 7 shoes. He was trying to catch a plane to Burlington Vermont without any shoes. He called over an agent from the TSA, who in turn called the head of security at the airport. They offered Harold a voucher for a new pair of shoes but he did not have time to look for a new pair of shoes. He would have missed his flight.

A woman who was also in the same line observed all that transpired. She saw a fellow with a suit and tie and no shoes. She told him that she felt very sorry for him and that she had a pair of slippers in her carry on which she offered to give to him. She took out a pair of pink slippers that were made to be worn with the slipper's tong separating the big toe and the other toes of the foot. Harold Willner had no choice. He took the slippers and proceeded to walk through the airport with his suit, tie, yarmulke, and pink tong slippers.

The plane was a commuter plane that required boarding by climbing up a set of portable steps. Harold's luck was that the slippers fell off his feet while ascending the staircase and fell to the ground. He had to go back down the staircase and put the slippers back on before climbing up the staircase again. Harold finally arrived at his seat on the plane feeling exasperated by the experience. A fellow who was on the plane with him and had witnessed the whole scene from the beginning told Harold, "I am amazed that throughout the whole ordeal you never lost your cool, you never became indignant, you never raised your voice. You acted with such civility that it astounds me! It is a credit to your religion."

Come and see. One can be wearing a suit and tie and pink slippers and at that very moment, sanctify the Name of G-d by acting like a mensch.

People can be so uncivil, losing their temper and becoming abusive at the slightest occurrence, such that proper and appropriate behavior on our part stands out and makes a powerful impression, about which it can be said "You are My Servant Israel, through whom I will be glorified."

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This write-up is adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Torah Tapes on the weekly Torah Portion. The halachic topics covered for the current week's portion in this series are:

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