

“If the daughter of a man who is a Kohen will be defiled through having an illicit relationship, she defiles her father.” (21:9)

Why does she defile her father more than her mother? Chazal teach us that the father is also punished. If, prior to his daughter’s defilement, he had been considered a respected member of the priesthood and the community, he is demoted. It seems that this degradation is due to his status as a Kohen. Why should this “punishment” be limited to Kehunah? Should the Yisrael who does a poor job raising his daughter be different? Last, according to those commentators who translate the phrase “ki seicheil” as “who begins,” rather than “who defiles,” why is the punishment restricted to the “beginning” of her straying? The Torah should have said, “A Kohen’s daughter who defiles herself.” What is so special about “the beginning” of her moral and spiritual breakdown?

Horav Zalman Sorotzkin, z.l., offers a practical insight into the Kohen’s daughter who defiles herself. When a young woman demonstrates a moral breakdown by acting promiscuously, it is usually due to one of two phenomena: she inherited this character flaw, usually from her mother; or, she had a tendency to stray and keep company with the “wrong crowd.” In the case of the latter, the father should be held in contempt, since the spiritual education of his children is his primary responsibility. When a young woman begins to act immorally – and we do not know for certain the origins of this depraved activity – we assume that it is inherent in her genes. In other words, we place the onus of guilt upon her mother. If we know for a fact that the mother is virtuous and upright, the blame is transferred to the father.

A Kohen may not marry a woman of questionable repute. Hence, the Kohen’s daughter who defiles herself achieved her notoriety as a result of her father’s lack of supervision. The father permitted her to cavort with anyone, thereby leading her astray. According to Chazal, the law concerning a promiscuous bas Kohen applies to one who is married. Thus, the daughter of a Yisrael is punished with death by *chenek*, strangulation, and the Kohen’s daughter receives the more stringent punishment of *sereifah*, death by burning. We wonder why a woman who has already left her father’s home and is married should still bring shame upon her father. After all, she is no longer a part of his home. However, her development began in her father’s home. He is to be blamed. This is the Torah’s intent when it states, “ki seicheil liznos”, “who begins to stray.” It is her beginning – in her father’s home – that catalyzed this tragedy. Her father should pay now, for not having paid attention earlier.