

“Cedarwood, crimson thread and hyssop.” (14:4)

The sin of *lashon hara* has its roots in arrogance. The sinner possesses a moral flaw, a character deficiency which allows him to think that he is better, more intelligent and more virtuous than others. He is the savior that is going to rid the world of those whom he perceives to be corrupt. He overlooks one thing: his own haughtiness, which breeds contempt for others, provokes him to think ill of them, catalyzing him to speak callously about them. The *teshuvah*, repentance, process takes this into consideration by making him bring cedarwood, crimson thread and hyssop along with his sacrifice, so that he will first purge himself of his addictive arrogance before he eventually achieves atonement.

The cedarwood represents the individual's haughtiness, as the cedar tree grows tall and imposing. The crimson thread is dyed red with a dye from a lowly creature, and the hyssop is a lowly bush; both symbolize the sinner's newly-found humility.

Sefer HaMeshalim offers a powerful analogy that lends insight into the underlying source of arrogance. A donkey was once loaded with strong perfumes, whose pleasant odor could be sensed at a distance. As it walked through the streets, the donkey noted with pride how people tried to come close to him. Of course, being a donkey, this went to his head. When he returned to the stable that evening, the donkey was all mouth as he pompously talked about his greatness and how all the people sought to get close to him.

The next day the load was different. The donkey was carrying fertilizer, which had a strong, fetid odor. As the donkey walked through the streets, people moved as far away as they could. No one would go near the beast with its foul-smelling burden. When the donkey returned to his stable that evening, he was as arrogant as before: “Today the people were really running scared of me. They were intimidated by my presence and ran from me. You see, one day I can have people falling over me, and the next day I can have them running in fear.”

The wise fox who overheard the donkey's foolish braying came over and said, “Foolish donkey that you are. It is not you that people fear or love. It is your load. When you carry perfume, they gravitate to the wonderful smell. When you are carrying fertilizer, they run from the foul odor. They could care less about you. You are nothing. It is what you carry that determines the way people react to you.”

The same idea applies to people. The *baal gaaveh*, arrogant person, thinks that everyone respects and fears him. Little does he realize that it is all in his mind. The *baal gaaveh* has a powerful imagination. He has conjured up in his mind that everybody reveres and admires him, when, in reality, it is far from true. A mind is a terrible thing to waste, especially if it is being wasted on an imaginary obsession with oneself.