

## And they found a man gathering wood on the Shabbos day... and they pelted him with stones. (15:32,36)

The *mekoshesh eitzim*, wood gatherer, who was the first *mechalel Shabbos*, desecrator of *Shabbos*, was executed by stoning. The Torah writes, *Vayirgemu oso b'avanim*, "And they pelted him with stones," in the plural. Interestingly, when the *mekallel*, blasphemer, was executed by stoning, the Torah writes, *Viyirgemu oso even*, "And they stoned him to death," in the singular (*Vayikra* 24:23). What is the reason for this change in the Torah's vernacular?

This question was asked of the **Chidushei HaRim** when he was a young boy. Known as a child prodigy, Rabbinic leaders would often pepper him with difficult questions to see how the young genius would respond. When posed with this question, the young child's eyes lit up as he gave his reply, "I remember that the *Baalei Tosfos* in the *Talmud Bava Basra* 119b cite the *Midrash* which contends that the *mekoshesh's* intention was *l'shem Shomayim*, for the sake of Heaven," the child began. "Apparently, the people were grumbling that, since Hashem decreed that no one would enter *Eretz Yisrael* due to their participation in the sin of the *meraglim*, they should not bother performing *mitzvos*. The *mekoshesh* sought to disprove their baseless reasoning by desecrating *Shabbos*, thereby incurring the death penalty. This would teach the people that everyone must perform *mitzvos*. Not being granted access to *Eretz Yisrael* is certainly no excuse for ignoring *mitzvos*."

"As a result of their faulty reasoning, there were Jews who, upon being instructed to stone the *mekoshesh*, were hesitant about it. They harbored second thoughts, thinking to themselves that perhaps the *mekoshesh* was not such a bad guy after all. His intentions were noble. He wanted to teach the nation an important lesson. Who knows how many lives he had saved by his commission of a sin? Therefore, when *Klal Yisrael* stoned the *mekoshesh*, not everyone was on the same page concerning the man's culpability. Some must have felt that he deserved a reward – certainly not stoning. Thus, the Torah uses the plural to describe the stoning. There was a strong difference of opinion among the executioners."

"Concerning the blasphemer, the consensus of emotion was all proactive. This man's actions warranted the death penalty. He has blasphemed Hashem's Name. Everyone was on the same page concerning this sinner. Thus, the Torah records the stoning in the singular."