

## Any open vessel that has no cover fastened to it is contaminated/impure. (19:15)

It is sad, but true: A person is most often judged by his external appearance. His manner of dress, be it conventional or “different,” determines our first opinion of him. We become caught up in the *chitzoniyus*, externals, and ignore the “real” Jew, the *pnimiyus*, internal essence of the person who stands before us. I have found this to be a reality, especially in dealing with individuals of both genders who are incarcerated for various felonies – some light, others serious, but felonies no less. At first glance, they might present themselves in an unsavory light, but, upon getting to know them over time, one realizes that they are actually troubled individuals who made the wrong choices – and were caught! They are human beings with feelings, ambitions, hopes and desires, who one day might be rehabilitated and become contributing members of society.

The *Kotzker Rebbe, zl*, addresses the significance of measuring a human being by his internal qualities, rather than by outward appearances. He derives this idea from the distinction between a *kli cheres*, earthenware vessel, and *kli matchos*, metal vessel, with regard to becoming *tamei*, ritually contaminated, upon coming into contact with a *davar tamei*, a ritually contaminated agent.

According to the *halachah*, which is derived from the above *pasuk* in our *Parsha*, a metal vessel becomes *tamei* when its **exterior** is touched by a *davar tamei*. Earthenware vessels, however, become *tamei* only from the **inside**. Actual contact is not needed. Indeed, if the contaminated agent is suspended within the *kli cheres*, the vessel is rendered *tamei*.

The *Kotzker* explains the distinction between the two *keilim*, in that a metal vessel is in its own right a precious commodity. Its “inside,” or the purpose of its use, does not necessarily determine its value. Therefore, as soon as contact is made within it – the vessel becomes *tamei*. An earthenware vessel is not made of valuable material. Earth, clay, has little to no value. The value of an earthenware vessel is determined by its functionality, what it can contain, and how it can be used. Thus, it can be rendered impure only by attacking the source of its value – its inside. It becomes *tamei* from within, while the metal vessel becomes *tamei* externally.

People may be likened to earthenware vessels. Man’s value should not be based upon external appearances. The value of a human being is determined by what is inside, his internal essence, his intrinsic being. The façade we see before us is all too often nothing more than a façade, a camouflage donned to mislead others. Indeed, if I may add, the word “person” is derived from the Latin *persona*, which means mask. We all put on a mask. The real “person” is defined by what we **he does**, **not** by what is **seen**. It is what is inside that counts.

The following episode recounted by Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetsky, underscores this idea. *Horav Aryeh Levine, zl*, was called the *Tzaddik* of *Yerushalayim*. There is no dearth of reasons to support his worthiness for this title. One of his many activities which earned him the distinction of a

righteous Jew was his involvement with Jewish inmates, mostly members of the *Irgun*, who were incarcerated by the British in miserable prisons in Israel prior to its becoming a state. The *tzaddik* would make a weekly visit every *Shabbos* to the prison, bringing food and clothes to the men, together with an abundance of love and empathy. These prisons were neither air-conditioned nor heated. Yet, he never missed a *Shabbos* visit, despite cold that seeped into the bones, rain, or sweltering heat. Well, he did miss one time, but that is what this story is about.

One *Shabbos*, shortly after he had arrived at the prison, a messenger came to summon him home for an emergency. His daughter had become paralyzed, and the doctors had no hope for her recovery. He was needed at home to render support to his the family. *Rav Aryeh* left immediately, leaving the inmates with the ambiguous news that a tragedy had stricken his family. They had no idea what had happened, how serious it was, or whether it had been resolved.

The very next *Shabbos*, *Rav Aryeh* appeared at the prison at his usual time – despite the continuing tragedy and sadness that prevailed at his home. His was a real *Shabbos* service with Torah reading and all. The prisoners would usually pledge a few coins to *tzedakah*, charity, when they were called up to the Torah. That week the donations took on a different form of urgency.

The first inmate to receive an *aliyah*, to be called up to the Torah, declared, “I pledge one week of my life for the sake of *Rav Aryeh*’s daughter.” The next inmate did one better by pledging a month of his life to her. The pledges kept on coming, with each ensuing inmate upping the ante – so beloved to them was their revered *Rebbe*, and by extension, his family. This went on until the last prisoner to receive an *aliyah* cried out, “What is our life compared to *Rav Aryeh*’s anguish? I give up the remaining days of my life for *Rav Aryeh*’s daughter!”

At that moment, hearing this incredible display of love, *Rav Aryeh* just broke down and wept. It may sound like a miracle, and by medical standards it certainly was, because that *Motzei Shabbos*, *Rav Aryeh*’s daughter began to move. Hour by hour, day by day, she began to improve more and more, until Hashem blessed her with a complete recovery.

For all intents and purposes, society had deemed these men criminals. It is beyond the scope of this essay to address the subject of the cruelty or false nature of their incarceration. According to society’s norms, however, their value as human beings had been greatly diminished. This amazing story clearly shows how far from the truth this statement really is.