

For they are a nation bereft of counsel, and there is no discernment in them. (32:28)

One would think that an individual who is unable to render sound advice lacks discernment. There is a reason we refer to it as “sage” advice. One who “can” renders advice. One who is unable to determine, make distinction or perceive, is not one from whom we seek advice. If so, the *pasuk* is redundant. “For they are a nation bereft of counsel” – means that they are too foolish to recognize their own conceit. Why does the Torah add that “there is no discernment in them”? Obviously, they are not rocket scientists if they cannot figure out the course of events.

Nachal Kedumim explains that indeed there are situations in which a wise man does not render advice, specifically because of his acuity. On the contrary, in such an instance, it would be foolish to say anything, for fear that it will backfire on him. He supports this with *Chazal's* citation of the dialogue that ensued between Achashveirosh and the *Chachmei Yisrael*, wise men of *Yisrael*. The *Talmud Megillah* 12b relates that following Vashti's audacious behavior, the king was in a state of fury. Something had to be done. He had been embarrassed in front of the entire populace. No one shames the king and gets away with it – not even the queen. Since they were the wisest men in the country, the king turned to *Chachmei Yisrael* for their sage advice on how to deal with the Vashti problem.

These wise men understood that at present, the king was inconsolable. His outrage fueled by humiliation was bristling. The wrong answer would be the end of them. They also realized that over time, an angry person calms down. Today, the king was out of control and sought revenge for his bruised ego. But, what if tomorrow he were to wake up in a better mood and “missed” his “beloved” Vashti? The Jews who said, “Kill her!” would be next in line. On the other hand, to say, “Forgive her!” was inconsistent with the respect one owed royalty. After all, she did disgrace the king and such an infraction could not be tolerated.

The *Chachmei Yisrael* were in a quandary. What does a truly wise man do when he is firmly implanted between a rock and a hard place? He feigns ineptitude. This is exactly what these wise men did, by responding to Achashveirosh that ever since the destruction of the Temple and their exile from the Holy Land, they were no longer able to cogently render decisions regarding life and death issues. Perhaps the king should entertain the notion of seeking advice from Amon or Moav, two nations that were living quite comfortably on their land. They were able to think through all aspects of the issue. Thus, the *Chachmei Yisrael* brilliantly thwarted any danger to themselves by presenting themselves as inept. Only an arrogant fool renders advice when it might backfire on him.

Consequently, we see that the above *pasuk* is far from redundant. On the contrary, it is due to his astuteness that he feigns an inability to offer advice. In certain circumstances, keeping one's mouth shut and shying away from offering advice is actually a sign of a sagacious mind.