

Righteousness, righteousness shall you pursue. (16:20)

The *Mishnah* in *Meseches Peah* 8 derives from the above *pasuk* that one who is healthy, but claims he is crippled or blind, for whatever reason (usually for profit), will not leave this world until he himself becomes afflicted with what he has claimed to have. *Horav Bunim, zl, m'Peshischa* questions this statement. Will this, likewise, apply to one who presents himself as a *tzaddik*, righteous person? Will he also not die before he becomes a *tzaddik*? If the *pasuk* teaches us that one must be straight, trustworthy and honorable, can we consider this man honorable? Should he be rewarded by becoming a *tzaddik* simply because he claims that he is one?

The *Peshischa* explains this with a *mashal*, parable. A wealthy man was traveling and chanced upon a *shikur*, drunk, rolling in a dung heap. Obviously, this man had lost all sensitivity and self-esteem. The wealthy man instructed his servants to remove him from the heap, scrub him down, dress him in priest's vestments, bring him to his mansion and assign him a nice, clean room. A few hours elapsed, and our drunk woke from his stupor to see himself attired in a priest's habit and surrounded by servants who asked him, "How can we be of assistance to his Reverence?" "What would his Reverence like to drink?" "Can we bring his Reverence to a specific destination?" etc.

Our drunk was certain that this was all a dream. He was far from wealthy and even less sober. What was going on? This could not be his home. He usually passed out in a dung heap. As the ruse continued, with the servants prepared to do anything for his Reverence, a thought entered his mind: Perhaps he was having a dream, with his poverty and alcoholism nothing but a dream. The reality was that he was a member of the cloth, a distinguished priest who was wealthy and lived in a mansion. If this was the case, he must leave immediately and travel to the Vatican, because is that not where all priests congregate? He should at least inquire concerning the location of his church. He would have to wing the service, since he was clueless about what a priest does.

He needed to implement a test to determine the truth: Was he or was he not a priest? He obtained a Bible written in Latin, because that was the language spoken by priests. He conjectured that if he could read it fluently – then he must be a priest. If, however, it was hieroglyphics to him, it would indicate that he was actually a poor drunk and his new attire was a façade. The servants kept up with their requests to serve him. He opened up the Bible and could not read a word. This would imply that he was not a priest. If this was true, however, why were the servants still referring to him reverently, as if to a priest? Apparently, he decided, none of the priests was fluent in Latin. It was all a sham. He was as bad as they were.

The *Peshischa* concluded his story. "This is the punishment for one who attempts to beguile others that he is a *tzaddik*. He will do it long enough that he himself begins to believe and accept the ruse. When he enters the *yeshivah*, the *shul*, and removes a tome of *Talmud*, a *sefer* written by one of the commentators, and, lo and behold, he has no clue to its meaning – he will ascertain that *tzaddikim* are also not knowledgeable. He will not say that he is a sham. No! He will surmise that all the others who "claim" to be erudite are not! After all, since he knows nothing, and he is a *tzaddik*,

so they must probably be as uneducated as he.

This is the greatest punishment, because now he has lost everything. He is not righteous, and he begins to slander those who are.