

## Water like impetuosity--you cannot be foremost, because you mounted your father's bed; then you desecrated Him Who ascended my couch. (49:4)

Reuven's impetuosity cost him his right to national leadership. We may wonder if Reuven's action was really that inappropriate. After all, he was demonstrating overwhelming respect to his mother. Indeed, the *Torah* lists Reuven together with the rest of his brothers. This causes *Chazal* to comment that Reuven was as righteous as they. He did not sin. He erred and was deserving of a formal reprimand. Why, however, should he have lost the *bechorah*?

**Horav Zaidel Epstein, Shlita**, makes a compelling statement. Reuven was certainly demonstrating concern for his mother's feelings, fulfilling the *mitzvah* of *kibud eim*, honoring his mother. What about his father? Is he permitted to neglect honoring his father in order to respect his mother? Yaakov was implying to Reuven that his impetuosity caused him not to think of all the ramifications of his actions. His impulsiveness caused him to lose sight of his father's needs. Consequently, commensurate with his level and position, his potential for leadership was viewed as deficient. Therefore, he lost the birthright.

*Horav Epstein* cites a similar instance in the *Talmud 31b* which recounts how Eili the *Kohen Gadol* sent a *Kohen* to slaughter a bullock. When Shmuel, who later became the leader of *Klal Yisrael*, saw that they were looking for a *Kohen*, he said to them, "Why do you go looking for a *Kohen* to perform the *shechitah*? The *shechitah* may be performed by a *zar*, layman!" They immediately brought him to Eili, who asked him, "How do you know this?" Shmuel responded with a valid proof from the *Torah*. Eili replied, "You have spoken well, but you are guilty of rendering a decision in the presence of your *rebbe*. Whoever gives a decision in the presence of his teacher is liable for the death penalty." Thereupon, Shmuel's mother, Channah, came and cried and begged forgiveness. Shmuel was spared, but not until Eili expressed strong criticism regarding his impulsive behavior.

When we think about it, we should question: What did Shmuel do that was so irresponsible? All he did was state a *halachah*! In fact, as the *Maharsha* posits, Shmuel was only two years old at the time. Rather than focusing on his brilliance, he was chastised for speaking "out of turn." One would think that rather than be criticized, Shmuel should have been praised for his scholarly application of the laws. In truth, Shmuel was criticized not for what he said, but rather for the manner in which he communicated. It appeared to the innocent bystander that Shmuel was insolent, rendering a decision in the presence of his *rebbe*.

We infer from here the enormous responsibility one has whenever he undertakes a given activity, regardless of its positive nature. It is quite conceivable that while our intentions are correct, and the focus of our activity is commendable, there might still be a tinge of impropriety that we have neglected to consider. That one little error can devastate the most glorious plans.