

And Hashem Elokim said to the woman, “What is it that you have done!” The woman said, “The serpent deceived me, and I ate.” (3:13)

Sforno interprets Hashem's query of Chavah as a rhetorical question. Clearly her actions were obvious. She ate from the tree. Hashem was not seeking information; rather, He wanted to present her with an opening, an opportunity to express remorse and begin the process of teshuvah, repentance. Ben Ish Chai writes in his drashos/Od Yosef Chai that we may derive from Hashem's dialogue with Chavah a powerful lesson concerning Hashem's goodness, His love and kindness to us. He wanted Chavah to provide some form of justification for her sin. Thus, He asked, “What is it that you have done?” This really means: “What led up to this infraction? What was the cause of your defection?”

Hashem is not seeking punitive damages against us. It is not His intention that we suffer punishment. He will prolong time, allowing the sinner to have some space, so that he can rationalize the absurdity of his actions, regret his sinful behavior, repent and return to Hashem. Furthermore, as Horav Yitzchak Zilberstein, Shlita, points out, Hashem not only entered into a conversation with Chavah in order to stimulate her teshuvah, He even went so far as to allude to her that perhaps she should discern a reason for her sin. Chavah responded, “The serpent deceived me.” She was not simply blaming the serpent; she was attempting to absolve herself, to somehow justify her actions.

When a person finds no reason to justify his behavior, it might work to his detriment. He becomes depressed and self-loathing. The result of such self-deprecation can be resentment and a reason not to repent. The sinner sees only negativity; he is too far gone. Self-justification allows one room to breathe, to hold his head up in order to gather the necessary courage to repent.

Hashem knows that remorse and regret might be immediate, but the next step, repentance, is much more difficult. He allows us some time. This is why He entered into a conversation with

Chavah: to give her time to come to her senses, to realize her sin, and to regret her actions.

The cause of sin is important and plays a pivotal role in how we might view the actual transgression and its perpetrator. Rav Zilberstein cites the Yalkut Shimoni on Melachim I 16, who comments on Melachim I 21:25, "There has never been anyone like Achav, who sold himself to do what was evil in the eyes of Hashem." Apparently, Rabbi Levi expounded on this pasuk over a period of six months. One night, the soul of Achav appeared to him in a dream, with a bitter accusation. Why is it that for the past six months he has maintained his emphasis on the beginning of the pasuk, which decries Achav's wickedness, but he has neglected to quote the second half of the pasuk, "because Izevel, his wife, had incited him"? At least, this way his students would know that it was not entirely Achav's fault. He had an evil wife who spurred him on! Rabbi Levi woke up and reacted accordingly. For the next six months, his exposition on the pasuk was: "There had never been anyone like Achav, whose wife incited him."

We derive from here the overriding importance that motive, background and influence play in the performance of a sin, and how we should take all of this into mind when judging a sinner. Yes, not all sins are created equal, and not all sinners are cut from the same cloth. To bundle them all into one group would be doing them all a disservice, as well as undermining the chances for teshuvah to occur. How often do we meet individuals who have strayed far from the Torah path, to the point that the secular life they lead is, in their minds, their way of acting like "good Jews." They simply do not know, because, regrettably, nobody taught them. They assimilated at a very young age and grew into maturity and adulthood with the belief that this is the way it is supposed to be. They would love to change, but sixty, seventy years, a family of three generations, is often too much to ignore. Yes, they sinned, but are they "sinners"? That is for Hashem to determine.