

The entire assembly removed him to the outside of the camp, they pelted him with stones. (15:36)

The Torah uses the plural of stone, *avanim*, which implies that a group participated in the execution of the *mekoshesh eitzim*, wood-gatherer. He was not the only one incarcerated at the time. The *megadef*, blasphemer, was also awaiting execution. Concerning his punishment, the Torah writes, *Vayirgemu oso even*, "They stoned him to death," with the word *even* written in its singular form (*Vayikra* 24:23). Apparently, a difference existed between the manners of their individual executions. The *Maharam Lublin, zl*, was asked this question when he was a young child. He replied that, concerning the *mekoshesh*, some contended in his favor that he was acting *l'shem Shomayim*, for Heaven's sake. The nation understood that he had desecrated *Shabbos* with the knowledge that, as a result of his sin, he would be executed. He felt the people were not taking *chillul Shabbos* seriously. Thus, he gave up his life to teach them this lesson. A poor reason to commit an egregious sin, but nonetheless certainly some people viewed him as a hero. Therefore, varied emotions played themselves out during his execution. Thus, the Torah writes the word *avanim* in the plural. This rationalization did not apply to the blasphemer upon whom the nation had no problem passing judgment.

This idea plays itself out in present-day situations as well. I recently spoke with a teenager who had become estranged from religious observance. The usual excuses did not apply. He hailed from a normal family with no skeletons in the closet. His parents are *frum*, observant, Torah Jews who have a loving relationship. Everything is good, but, for some reason, the boy is not happy. When one is not happy, whom does he blame? Hashem. It is irrational, but, sadly, it happens. After speaking with him and convincing him to at least put on *tefillin* every day, he told me, "I will always believe in Hashem. It is just the *mitzvos* that I have trouble with now."

One might plummet to the depths of depression, sever his relationship with Torah and *mitzvos*, but not with Hashem. That is the last frontier. It takes a seriously ill and severely alienated Jew to apostatize. Thus, when the *mekoshesh* sinned, people found ways to rationalize his actions. They had, however, no room for negotiation regarding the actions of the blasphemer.