

Reuven went and lay with Bilhah, his father's concubine ...The sons of Yaakov were twelve. (35:22)

Following the passing of Rachel *Imeinu*, Yaakov *Avinu* established his primary residence in the tent of Bilhah, Rachel's maidservant. This disturbed Reuven. He felt that it was an affront to his mother, Leah *Imeinu*, that the maidservant of Rachel had now become his mother's "rival." As a gesture of defending his mother's honor, Reuven moved his father's bed to Leah's tent. This is all that took place, no egregious sin, as the Torah implies. While Hashem judges the righteous by a deviation of a hairbreadth, thus transforming minor transgressions into sins of utmost gravity, Reuven's sin is, at worst, an apparent one. Indeed, Yaakov continued to consider him as one of the twelve tribes, as evinced by the Torah's emphasis that Yaakov's sons were twelve. Interestingly, Reuven, whose impetuosity got the better of him, is recorded in the Torah as committing a flagrant sin, while Cham, son of Noach, who actually committed an act of immoral perversion and disrespect, is recorded as "looking" where he should not have. "And Cham, the father of Canaan saw his father's nakedness and told his two brothers outside" (*Bereishis* 9:22). Cham enjoyed seeing his father drunk and disheveled. *Chazal* teach that he went much further in debasing his father in the most reprehensible manner. Yet, the Torah recorded his transgression merely as, "Cham saw," not as Cham did, just a slap on the wrist. Certainly, Cham's behavior warranted a stronger punishment than Reuven's behavior did.

Horav Yechiel Yaakov Weinberg, zl, focuses on the punishment as revealing the nature of the sin. Cham acted with abandon, diminishing his *tzelem Elokim*, image of Hashem, in which he was created. He acted like a low, base, uncouth degenerate, contrary to the way in which a human being should act. His punishment was worthy of the sin: he and his descendants would be slaves. A slave is treated like chattel, with no possessions that he can call his own. Reuven committed an act which demonstrated a lack of *tznius*, moral modesty, on his part. This resulted in his losing the *bechorah*, birthright of the firstborn, which diminished his esteem and standing. This all may be true, but our original question: Why does the Torah blow up Reuven's sin in its gory details and sweep (so to speak) Cham's perverse, base behavior under the carpet?

Rav Weinberg explains the distinction between the two negative events by employing *Horav Nosson Tzvi Finkel's* (the *Alter m'Slabodka, zl*) *mussar* principles. While the movement was the brain child of *Horav Yisrael Salanter, zl*, his students, of which the *Alter* was one of his premier disciples, broadened the scope as they disseminated the goals and objectives of the *Mussar* movement. Each one of his primary students focused on the aspect of *Rav Yisrael's* principles to which they had the greatest affinity. Obviously, everything meshed together; it was each individual approach that differed.

Focusing on *gadlus ha'adam*, the greatness of man, his potential to achieve unlimited spiritual greatness, the *Alter* emphasized the need for intellectual and emotional honesty. He encouraged each of his students to engage in rigorous intellectual inquiry, to question and challenge his own

beliefs and to confront his emotional biases, with the goal being a more truthful and authentic relationship with himself and others. The importance of one refining his *middos*, character traits, is vital to his growth. Individuals should be brutally honest with themselves by identifying their negative tendencies and then striving to rectify them through self-discipline and ethical conduct.

With this in mind we return to Reuven, who was filled with a sense of protest over what he felt was his mother's humiliation. He acted impulsively, exhibiting a lack of respect for his father's life of *tznius*. The Torah labels this act in the worst manner, considering it an incursion on his father's matrimonial relationship. The Torah penetrated the depths of Reuven's psyche to seek the source of this sin. The malignancy lay in a slight, almost insignificant, crack in the mores of *tznius*. By referring to Reuven's almost minor act as an immoral debasement, the Torah teaches us how far the slightest deviation, the most insignificant germ of negative *tznius*, can blow up out of proportion. *Gadlus ha'adam*: The greater one's potential for positive growth, the greater the possibility of a commensurate downfall, if his negative character traits are not purged.

Conversely, with regard to Cham, the perversion is no secret. Anyone opening a *Chumash/Rashi* is well aware of what Noach's youngest son did to him. Why, then, does the Torah seem to mitigate the sin? The Torah seeks to impart a powerful lesson, the source of the profligacy: *va'yaar*; he saw. Cham gazed inappropriately. He looked with *z'nus she b'ayin*, with immoral perspective that tainted his vision, resulting in a repugnant action.

In summation: Concerning Reuven, the Torah alludes to how the tiniest crack in his character traits would affect his spiritual persona to the point that he would be capable of acting in the manner the Torah attributes to him. With regard to Cham, his malevolence is no secret. The Torah teaches us the source of the punishment of each.