

## And now if You would but forgive their sin! – but, if not, erase me from this book that You have written. (32:32)

Herein lies the test of the true Torah leader. What are his priorities? Is it now about himself, or is it about his flock? Moshe *Rabbeinu's* first priority was to save his nation. The Almighty had threatened to put an end to this nation that seemed to keep on testing Him. Moshe first had to save them. Then he would see to it that they regain their status as the Chosen People. Once again, it is important to underscore that it was not the entire nation that had sinned. It was a group of mixed multitude who had come along for the ride. They could not handle the pressure. While their influence on the people was not great, they engendered a feeling of indifference within the people. Therefore, while the *hamon am*, common Jew, did not sin – he did not prevent the *eirav rav* from sinning either.

A *gadol*, Torah leader, places his flock's welfare before his own needs. He will even sustain personal material loss in order to spare his people pain. The following analogy, quoted by *Horav Yitzchak Hershkowitz, Shlita*, in his *sefer Nitzotzos*, aptly describes such a scenario. While the veracity of the story might not have been established, the message and intent is clear.

A small village in Japan was built atop a hill. At the foot of the hill was a beach that banked the ocean. The residents of this area were simple, hardworking family people. They lived a serene lifestyle, unbothered by the hustle and bustle of the big city. A wise old man lived in this city – right at the top of the hill. He was revered by the townspeople for his erudition and spiritual integrity. As such, he became the undeclared leader of the town. The sage was respected and loved by all, and these sentiments were reciprocated. The village was undergoing difficult times. During the last three years, it had not rained sufficiently, and the earth was parched. There was very little to eat, since, for the most part, the inhabitants sustained themselves through the produce which they yielded from farming. No crops – no food.

Then it began to rain. After three years of drought, it finally began to rain. The fields were irrigated, the seeds germinating and the crops returning. It was a bumper crop like no other. The people were excited and decided to throw a party to celebrate their good fortune. Since there was no room on top of the hill, they set up the festivities at the bottom of the hill, on the shore of the beach. Everyone joined in the celebration, except for the elderly sage and his grandson, who took care of him.

The sage sat atop the hill and watched with great joy and anticipation as his community's inhabitants enjoyed themselves. Suddenly, the sage and townspeople noticed the ocean move backward, at first just a few inches, then a few feet. Finally, the ocean came to rest fifteen feet from its original bank. When it pulled back, it left incredible treasures, such as fish and old coins of gold and silver left over from sunken ships.

The people were overwhelmed with the enormous bounty which had just literally been placed at their feet. They all began to dig in and claim the treasures. From above, the sage watched the entire scene with great joy. Suddenly, his joy turned to utter horror, as he saw the ocean rising up and forming a giant tidal wave. At any minute, this water would come crashing down on the unsuspecting people, crushing them all. What would any able bodied person do in such a situation? He would yell and scream, run down to warn the people, "Save yourselves! Save yourselves!" The elderly man was physically unable to walk – let alone run. His voice would never carry the distance to the ocean, let alone be heard over the cacophony of excitement as the people collected the ocean's booty.

The old man did not give up. He cared about the people. They were his community. He was their leader. He asked his grandson to take a torch, set it aflame and torch his house! The fire spread immediately and, within a few moments, everyone at the foot of the hill looked up in disbelief as they saw fumes of smoke rising up from their beloved leader's home. They dropped what they were doing and ran to save their leader's home. As a result, when the ocean came crashing down, they were no longer there. The old man had saved their lives by sacrificing all of his worldly possessions.

The analogy is obvious; the lesson is compelling. Our Torah leaders, who sit high up on the hill, have an ability to see lucidly without being impaired by involvement in hoarding material booty that claims our allegiance away from Hashem. We do not hear their cries, because we are too busy chasing our profligate visions of grandeur. We are so obsessed with obtaining the booty that we do not see the mountain of horror about to come crashing down on us. The *gedolim* attempt to get our attention, but we do not hear them above the sounds of our excitement. We are programmed on self-destruct. The fire in the hearts of the *gedolim*, the fiery passion with which they cry out to us, even at the expense of their own health and welfare, can wake us up. The question is: Will they be in time?