

And the man that will act with willfulness... that man shall die, and if you shall destroy the evil from among Yisrael. The entire nation shall listen and fear, and they shall not act willfully anymore. (17:12,13)

How often – upon confronting a young Jewish boy or girl and inquiring why he or she has suddenly opted for living a life of spiritual risk, or of turning off completely to religious observance – will the response be, “I was turned off by the lack of truth, the dearth of intellectual honesty, the improper behavior such as *chillul Hashem* and hypocrisy”? Veritably, the response that we receive has a ring of truth to it. The system is perfect; the people, however, are human, and human beings err – some by not thinking, while others are simply dishonest. In our *parsha*, we confront an entirely new dimension to the meaning of truth. While this has very little to do with our opening question, it does go to the core of the truth as seen through the eyes of *gedolei Yisrael*, Torah leadership. Thus, while truth is considered the absolute only path to follow – this might not necessarily be objectively “true.”

The Torah addresses the episode of the *zakein mamre*, rebellious elder. He is an acknowledged ordained sage, who is qualified to sit on the *Sanhedrin* – yet defies their ruling and encourages others to follow suit. The Torah teaches us that such defiance may not be countenanced, thus mandating that this elder be put to death during the most public venue, such as the next Festival, when throngs of Jews visit Yerushalayim. This is done so that the nation will “hear and listen” and refrain from emulating such mutinous behavior.

Let us attempt to analyze this incident, so that we are able to judge it in its true perspective. The *Sanhedrin* has ruled. This sage is no spiritual slouch. He is a Torah scholar of the same caliber as the members of the *Sanhedrin*. He feels that the ruling Judicial body grievously erred in rendering their decision. What should he do? Ignore the truth? If anybody is guilty of *sheker*, falsehood, it should be the *Sanhedrin*! This is what the rebellious elder feels, and he is prepared to stake his reputation, even risk his life, to stand by the truth – as he sees it. Yes, I added, “as he sees it.” He might be right; he might be sincere. What he says might even be true. *Halachah*, however, follows the *Sanhedrin*’s ruling – even if they are wrong! They are right, simply because they are the *Sanhedrin*.

The rebellious elder screams, “I am the truth – you are false.” He is put to death. Here is a case when “too much truth” is false! He may be greater than they are; he may see the error of their decision. He must still accept the *Sanhedrin*’s ruling. Otherwise, he will die for his commitment to the truth “as he sees it”!

What does this teach us? How are we to understand this episode, which, for all intents and purposes, can rock the faith of a young person whose conviction is one of rote, habit, religious

upbringing, without much time spent on explaining the beauty and truth of Judaism? **Horav Yeruchem Levovitz, zl**, derives an important principle herein: Everything has good and bad within it. The greatest, most loftiest attribute, has good – and bad. *Tzedakah*, charity, is clearly a wonderful attribute. Yet, our sages admonish us not to give all of our wealth away. *Chazal* provide parameters to follow in the *tzedakah* process. This idea applies across the board, in every area of human endeavor. The most refined *middah*, character trait, has good and bad within it. Eating is important. One must receive nourishment, or else he will become ill and die. On the other hand, many illnesses are the result of what we eat. Does that mean we should stop eating? Why do we eat, if it might prove dangerous to our health?

The answer, explains the *Mashgiach*, is that, while it is true that eating can prove dangerous, not eating can be even more dangerous! Therefore, one must follow what is more likely to be beneficial for him. We weigh everything, crunch the numbers, and then compare the averages. We follow the numbers and go with the majority. Certain medications are, by their very nature, dangerous, but, for people with life-threatening illnesses, the option of not taking these medications presents a greater risk of death. In other words, there is “true” and there is “true.” It is all a matter of perspective.

When an individual confronts a situation, the correct and true approach is in accordance with the variables involved; he must assess which option presents the greater good. “True” is determined by “good.” Therefore, the *zakein mamre* might feel that he is acting for the benefit of the truth, even if it goes against the principles established by the *Sanhedrin*; even if he feels that they are wrong, the definition of what is true changes. They might be wrong this one time, and he might be right this one time; nonetheless, their ruling is what the Torah says we should follow. Thus, they are right and true; the *zakein mamrei* is wrong and false. Truth is most often to be found by the majority, the *Sanhedrin*. They might err once in a great while, but since they are right most of the time, they represent the truth. Whoever defies their ruling is a rebellious elder and must be expunged.

Rav Yeruchem derives a life lesson from here. An individual who has occasion to look into an endeavor – and notices what one would consider an infringement of the truth – should learn a lesson from the rebellious elder. Truth gravitates to the majority. If something is true most of the time, or if most of the leadership is comprised of honest, upstanding, decent Torah Jews, then the endeavor is true. The few rotten apples do not define the endeavor. One should not judge Judaism by the actions of a few people, who, by their nefarious activities, impugn the integrity of religious observance. There will always be those sick, selfish, despotic individuals who present a picture of righteousness, while simultaneously ripping off the community. These individuals are sick. Why should the rest of us be blamed for – and suffer as a result of – the actions of a few?