

For the earth is filled with robbery through them. (6:13)

The *Midrash* teaches that the members of that generation were no ordinary thieves. They made sure to steal less than a *shavah perutah*, value of a penny, which, according to Jewish law, is not accorded judgment in *bais din*. Therefore, they were punished by Heaven as a *bnei Noach*, who are treated differently by law. A *ben Noach* has seven *Noachidic* commandments. One of them is the prohibition against stealing. A *ben Noach*, however, is punished even for stealing less than the value of a *perutah*. A Jew must steal a *perutah* in order to be punished. Why is this? In his commentary to *Eiruvim* 62a, *Rashi* writes: “A Jew is *mochel*, forgives/overlooks, anything less than a *perutah*. A non-Jew does not.” Money means so much to him that every fraction of a cent has meaning. Thus, if he steals less than a *perutah* – he pays.

The *Alter m'Slabodka*, **Horav Nossan Tzvi Finkel, zl**, derives an important practical lesson from this *Halachah*. Let us step back a moment and cogitate upon the difference between a Jew and a *ben Noach*: less than the value of a penny! The Jew overlooks what he considers an insignificant amount of money; thus, he forgives whoever takes it from him. The gentile neither overlooks, nor does he forgive. Half a penny divides us! For half a penny a person belittles himself to descend to the level of a *ben Noach*.

The lesson goes deeper. It does not take much to elevate oneself. The smallest upward movement makes a spiritual difference which goes beyond our ability to understand. Likewise, a backward movement – regardless how insignificant – is a negative spiritual drop. The eminence of the great is not to be measured only in the great steps. Every step forward, regardless of its size and significance, is a giant spiritual step. The barometer of spiritual excellence by which they are measured is much different from ours.