

In this wilderness shall your carcasses drop. (14:29)

During their forty-year trek through the Wilderness, *Klal Yisrael* breached their relationship with Hashem, as they committed a number of transgressions. Yet, the

Almighty punished the actual perpetrator(s) and forgave the rest of the populace. These were not simple sins. The *chet ha'eigel*, sin of the Golden Calf, was no simple transgression. Shortly after they left Egypt, *Klal Yisrael* committed a sin of grave proportions, as they turned their backs on Hashem, Who had done so much for them. They were scared; their leader, Moshe *Rabbeinu*, was late in descending the mountain, so they sinned. This was no excuse. Yet, Hashem forgave them.

Klal Yisrael sinned when they were *misonenim*, complained about the “conditions” to which they were subjected: no meat; Heavenly bread; let us go back to Egypt where we can have fish and melons. These were dreams, but if the dreams gave them reason to complain, they would use them. Such ingratitude, such lies – yet, Hashem forgave them. While the actual sinners paid with their lives, the rest of the nation received another demerit, but they were forgiven.

How can we forget the *machlokes* Korach, the debacle initiated by an individual who just was not happy, despite all of his wealth and prestige? He wanted more. He had his followers, but then all such despots present themselves as the hero of the oppressed, the man who caters to everyone’s needs – not just to an elite few. Once again, lies and more lies. The perpetrators were punished by being swallowed alive into the earth. The rest of the people? Forgiven. In every sin, the immediate people were punished. Everyone else received a slap on the hands, and their *teshuvah*, repentance, was accepted.

What happened with the *meraglim*, spies? Until this very day, we continue to experience the aftershocks of that sin. It took place on *Tishah B'Av*, which became our national day of mourning. We also grieve for the two *Batei Mikdash*, Temples, which were destroyed then, as well. It was decreed that every adult male between the ages of forty to sixty was going to perish in the Wilderness. Essentially, the generation that left Egypt was told that it – in its entirety – would not enter the Promised Land. No one was forgiven. How was this sin different from all of the others? Is a sin not a sin?

Obviously, the commentators, each in his own manner, offer their insights into such a compelling question and render their understanding of the sin of the *meraglim* and its collective impact on *Klal Yisrael*. *Horav Yitzchak Elchanan Spector, zl*, offers a profound explanation – one that goes to the very crux of the attitude manifest by many of our co-religionists – both observant and non-observant. The *rav* derives from here that all *aveiros*, sins, are forgivable. Hashem embraces those who sin and allows them back into the “family” of *Klal Yisrael*, as long as they repent with sincerity. Hashem does not distinguish between those sins that are *bein adam laMakom*, perpetrated against G-d, and those which are *bein adam l'chaveiro*, sins against one’s fellow man. A sin is a sin – and *teshuvah* is *m'cha'per*, atones. Thus, the sins of the Golden Calf and the *misonenim*, the

complainers, who complained to Hashem, were forgiven, as well as the sins *bein adam l'chaveiro* of Korach and his henchmen. However, there is one type of sin that is not forgivable: *ben adam l'atzmo*, sins against oneself. There is absolutely no excuse, and hence, no room for forgiveness, when a person sins against himself. *Klal Yisrael* cried in a manner which *Chazal* term as *b'chiyah shel chinam*, unwarranted weeping. They had nothing to worry about, yet, they cried. This is unwarranted and represents a sin against oneself. One who acts with shortsightedness, whose actions reflect simpleminded obtuseness, does not warrant forgiveness. The nation that sinned on that fateful night was not ready to enter *Eretz Yisrael*.

The concept of sinning against oneself has many ramifications, and, because I feel it is of critical importance, I am expounding on the subject. There are those who deprive themselves of their G-d-given ability to live. Anecdotally, a middle-aged man collapsed in his office and succumbed. His physician, who had known him well for many years, confided to a mutual friend, "Jim sacrificed for his beliefs." "What beliefs did he cherish?" the friend queried. "Jim believed," the physician replied, "that he could live a thirty-five-year old's life in a fifty-year-old body."

It is what one would call a bitter *gelechter*, bitter joke. Are we honest with ourselves? We are driven to succeed, we run to achieve, and go out of our way to acquire and amass more and more. For what purpose and at whose expense? Do we spend enough time with our children and our spouses, or are we too busy making money?

There is another form of sinning against ourselves. People make mistakes. This is a fact of life. It is how we react to these mistakes that determines our character. One should learn from his mistakes, so that he does not repeat them; in this way, he becomes a better person. There are, regrettably, those who become fixated on the errors of the past, to the point that they cannot go forward. Such a person loses his initiative to grow, to be productive, since he is constantly burdened with remorse. This does not mean that remorse is not a good thing. It is a vital component of the *teshuvah* process, but there is a difference between sincere regret and obsessive remorse. The essence of spirituality is to fill one's mission in life with positive activity, Torah study and *maasim tovim*, good deeds. When one is in a state of inaction due to his morbid approach to his past, he becomes paralyzed by depression and achieves nothing in life – other than making everyone around him miserable.

No one is perfect. The experts in emotional and mental health urge us to accept ourselves. While we may not necessarily approve of everything about ourselves – be it our origins, character, acumen or physical appearance – it is who we are, who Hashem created. Unless one comes to terms with "himself," he courts disaster. Indeed, Hashem only expects us to be "ourselves" – not someone else.

In a novel about *Yeshiva* life during World War II, a noted observant author relates the story of *yeshivah* students from different *yeshivos* who developed a relationship. As they began talking about their origins, one student said that he was an *aveil*, in mourning, for his mother who was

murdered by the Nazis. The other student confessed, "I, too, am an orphan." Later in the story, this same student admitted that actually both of his parents were still alive: "But do not be disturbed that I told you I was an orphan. I was not lying. I meant that I am an orphan in a special way. Do you understand? I am an orphan – from myself."

Many of us do not realize that we have made ourselves into orphans by disregarding who we really are. We do not know ourselves. We underestimate our potential. We refuse to go that extra mile of achievement, as we eschew accepting new responsibilities for fear that we will not execute them appropriately. We shirk challenge, run away from responsibility; indeed, we deprive ourselves of the chance for success out of fear that we will not make it. One cannot win the race if he does not enter it. We have so little confidence in our G-d-given abilities. Is there a greater sin than this? In the event that, under pressure, we discover that we have risen to the challenge and excelled, our reaction is: "I did not know I had it in me." If one does not even try, how will he ever know? The *yeshivah* student who commented, "I am an orphan from myself" was superior to us in that he was, at least, honest enough with himself to concede to the truth. We spend our lives hiding from the truth, blaming the entire world – but not ourselves.

I believe it was the *Kotzker Rebbe, zl*, who said, "The Almighty **cannot** be deceived, your neighbor **must not** be deceived; and one who deceives himself remains a fool." He also said, "Not only is one who hates another soul called wicked – but he who hates himself is also called wicked. This brings us to the last and quite possibly, the most egregious of sins, because of its impact upon everyone around us: self-loathing. An eighteenth century secular lawyer once said, "More of us than we care to admit live in self-made dungeons behind bars erected by our own resentment."

Self-hate is perhaps the most destructive form of hatred, since it is rarely identified and almost never placated. As a result of malignant self-hatred, one is plagued with self-imposed demons, and must take out his loathing on others. This is especially true in the area of religion, where we find the most radical usurpers of Torah Judaism are nothing more than demoralized individuals seeking to justify their own inadequacies and lack of faith by slandering those who are observant, and undermining the religion.

A noted secular psychotherapist writes about his decades of dealing with troubled individuals, "I have dealt with maladjusted and troubled individuals... If I were to search for the central core of difficulty in people as I have come to know them, it is that in the great majority of cases they despise themselves, regard themselves as worthless and unlovable."

The cruelty we inflict upon others is matched only by the cruelty we inflict upon ourselves. Old transgressions – real and imagined – are kept stored away in our mind, as if by keeping them fresh and bristling, we will succeed in exacting atonement by harsh self- condemnation. What we fail to realize is that atonement is achieved by positive change – not by self-flagellation. All we achieve by our self-hate is to create a miserable life for ourselves and all those who have the misfortune of being connected to us. Only someone who believes in himself and has a positive outlook can

believe in others. One who is an emotional wreck himself inevitably inflicts his own failings on others.