

The rabble that was among them cultivated a craving ... and you shall eat meat... not for one day shall you eat, nor two days... until a month of days, until it will come out of your nose. (11:4, 18, 19,20)

An individual who lacks the basic character trait of *hakoras hatov*, gratitude, is a deficient person. His negativity toward those from whom he benefits engenders a negativity throughout his entire character, eventually leading to a lack of appreciation for all that Hashem does for him. Perhaps referring to an ingrate as deficient is not strong enough. An ingrate is a non-person. Part of humanness is the ability to recognize, acknowledge and appreciate the benefits one receives from others. Without this vital character trait, one is not a *mentch*, decent human being.

Having said this, we refer to the Torah's account of the *asafsuf*, a group of malcontents comprised primarily of the *eirev rav*, mixed multitude, who had the gall to complain that they lacked sufficient nourishment. The *manna* which they received did not replace a good steak. They wanted beef! Furthermore, they did not merely complain about the lack of food, they denigrated the entire Exodus. They claimed that Egyptian slavery would be far more acceptable than starving in the wilderness. Ingratitude spawned by uncontrolled desire catalyzed a punishment whereby the sinners received what they wanted in such amounts that it killed them. This was much like the addict who gets his fix, but does not check the amount or quality of his deadly product until he overdoses. His *taavah*, lust, becomes his downfall.

There is a debate between the *Mechilta* and *Sifri* concerning the length of punishment (how much time elapsed before the sinners died) and whether all of the sinners had received an equal punishment. Apparently, complaining has its relative limits, in which some people exhibit greater insolence than others. Commensurate with one's level of impudence is his form of punishment.

Rashi quotes the *Sifri* that distinguishes between the *k'sheirim*, relatively "decent ones," who were to die in the plague. They were drained of their strength and were compelled to lay on their beds until they passed on. The wicked ones, however, died while the meat was still between their teeth. In contrast, *Mechilta* contends that it was the wicked ones who suffered for a month before they were eased out of this world. The *k'sheirim*, whose sin was not as egregious, died quickly, receiving the punishment they deserved – quickly, and with the least amount of pain.

One question is pressing with regard to those who did not receive immediate punishment. Why did they continue to eat? Once they saw that the others had died upon eating the meat, why did they continue to eat? Who in his right mind would eat meat that is highly suspicious of contamination? No sane person takes a chance with his life once he observes someone else writhing in pain, doubling over and dying before his very eyes. It would give him serious reason to distance himself as far as possible from this scenario. He certainly would not go on eating the same piece of meat

that had been responsible for his friend's death!

Horav Yerachmiel Shmuel Chasid, Shlita, notes that this phenomenon may be sadly observed in the world of he who has fallen prey to chemical addiction – be it drugs or alcohol. One loses control over his life; his ability to make a sensible decision is impaired, as he falls deeper and deeper into the abyss of unbridled, unrestrained desire and addiction. He cites the *Biur HaGra* in his commentary to the beginning of *Sefer Mishlei*, who quotes the *Zohar HaKadosh*, that one who sins becomes the unfortunate recipient of a *ruach hatumah*, unclean/contaminated spirit, which drives him to sin unabated by any positive restraint. Once the people introduced their own *taavah*, lust, for meat, Hashem added to their lust. Each time they made a demand for meat, their lust was (Heavenly) increased.

If we approach the *asafsuf*, sinners, as acting similarly to one who is a victim of substance abuse, it allows us to understand how one could observe his friend falling victim to the meat, and nonetheless continuing to eat it himself. His first lust generated a second lust – only this time the (second) lust was much stronger. This might explain why he continued eating, but, if this is the case, why blame him? Is he any different from someone who is chemically dependent, who are victims themselves of a disease?

Most alcoholics begin as social drinkers, but somewhere along the way they digress, and their drinking patterns change. With the disease there exists a physical, and/or psychological addiction to a mood altering chemical which will ameliorate his condition, and, when removed, results in withdrawal symptoms. This applies to all forms of chemicals – alcohol and drugs. The chemical disrupts a person's ability to function properly, to take control of his/her life. Once the addictive process begins, it becomes self-perpetuating, with the dependent person unable to stop – even though (he is aware that) the chemicals are destroying his family/social life, his ability to function and earn a living, and his health.

With this in mind, how can we refer to one group of sinners as *k'sheirim*, relatively decent, and the others as wicked? They were both obsessed with desire, victims of unbridled lust for meat. Were they different than the addict who has no control over his life?

I revert back to the beginning of this *dvar* Torah. It all harkens back to the origin of their sin: ingratitude. Some people simply do not care, while others are self-serving and selfish. Yet others have convinced themselves that they are not in someone's debt. Thus, the word *k'sheirim*, relatively decent, refers to the origin of their sin: Why were they not grateful? Concerning Hashem, we have no excuse whatsoever for ingratitude. Without His will, we would be nothing more than an afterthought.