

For I fear him lest he come and strike me down, mother and children. (32:12)

Rashi explains that, while Hashem did ensure Yaakov *Avinu* that He would protect him and that all would be good, perhaps, as a result of his “sin,” he might be compelled to fall into Eisav’s hands. Our Patriarch feared the repercussions of his sin. This was his *madreigah*, spiritual plateau, with regard to *yiraas cheit*, fear of sin. We can only begin to imagine what Yaakov’s criteria concerning sin were. Yaakov was concerned about the fact that he had made a *bris*, covenant/agreement, with the evil Lavan. Could this be a sin which would catalyze the loss of Hashem’s protection? This is the type of sin that caused Yaakov anxiety. Yaakov did not sin, but he feared that he might have subtly acted in a manner that, on his level of spirituality, might be considered a deficiency. How far did our holy, righteous leaders go in their fear of sin? What, as far as they were concerned, constituted a sin? The following story which occurred concerning the holy advocate of the Jewish People, *Horav Levi Yitzchak Berditchever, zl*, gives us a glimpse into the concept of *yiraas cheit*.

Rav Levi Yitzchak would seek any form of interpretation to subdue the prosecuting angels who were bent on extracting punishment from *Klal Yisrael* for their shortcomings. The *Berditchever* always looked for some vindication by which to absolve his people. One year, prior to *Rosh Hashanah*, a letter arrived from his holy *Rebbe*, *Horav Baruch, zl, m’Mezritch*. The *Maggid* wrote a short, ominous note: “This *Rosh Hashanah* – be especially watchful.” Reading these words penned by his *Rebbe* caused a shiver to go down *Rav* Levi Yitzchak’s spine. He must now be especially vigilant. He must find some righteous deed, some vindication to exonerate the nation. Otherwise, they might fall prey to the prosecutor’s complaints against them.

As was his custom prior to *Rosh Hashanah*, *Rav* Levi Yitzchak set out for the poor section of town. He began to wander through the streets and alleyways of this wretched section of town. Perhaps, here among the downtrodden, he might find some vindication. These people had suffered so much throughout the year; yet, they maintained their commitment to Hashem despite their deprivation. Maybe, maybe, here he would luck out.

Suddenly, he noticed a faint light burning in the window of one of the old, dilapidated houses. He walked over and peered at the window. He saw a young woman sitting, her head bowed, as she sat at the table reading *techinos* (supplications, which was a common prayer selection for women). The *Rebbe* knocked on the door and was admitted into the “house.” When the woman recognized who was standing before her, she became greatly agitated. She was well aware of another one of the *Rebbe*’s practices: to walk through the street exhorting sinners to repent before *Rosh Hashanah*.

Before the *Rebbe* had the opportunity to say a word, the woman broke out in bitter weeping, “*Rebbe*, it is true – I have sinned, but I have repented and have done whatever has been within my ability to cleanse myself of my sin.”

"Please do not be sad," the *Rebbe* began "You are not a sinner; on the contrary, you have earned great merit. This is why I was led to your home, but, please, tell me your story."

"As a young girl, I lived with my parents in a small village not far from Berditchev. My parents rented a milking station from the local *poritz*, gentile landlord. This is how they earned their livelihood. It all came to an end when I was seventeen years old, and my parents suddenly passed away. I needed to earn money to live, so I decided to ask the landlord if he would allow me to continue renting the milking station from him. When I entered his room, I could see that he looked at me in a strange manner. He began speaking to me in a lewd tone. Immediately, I saw that this gentile was up to no good. He came closer to me; I became frightened and pushed him away. Suddenly, he changed his attitude. 'Do not be frightened,' he said to me. 'I will not hurt you. I am taken away by the beauty of your hair. You can have the rental of the milking station for another three years – at half the price! I only want to kiss your hair.'

"And he took my locks in his hands and kissed them. I ran home feeling defiled by this course gentile. I went to bed, but was unable to sleep. I tossed and turned, but could find no rest for my soul. The thought that I had allowed that evil man to touch my hair was too much for me to bear. At dawn, I arose, cut my hair and left the house. I came to Berditchev and found work as a servant girl. Eventually, I met and married a fine man, who recently died. Now, I am once again left alone. This is my story."

Tears welled up in the *Rebbe's* eyes, as he listened to her tragic tale. Such a wondrous, righteous woman. Such sacrifice! Such utter commitment! "Did you save any of that precious hair?" he asked. "Yes. I saved one small lock as a reminder of my ordeal. When times are bad, I look at that lock in order to validate Hashem's punishment of me," she replied. When *Rav Levi* heard these words, he did not speak; rather, he left the house without a word.

Rosh Hashanah arrived, and the *Rebbe* prepared himself for the holy day in his usual manner. He went to the *mikvah*, came home, dressed himself in white clothing, donned his *Tallis*, and proceeded to the *shul*. It was *Shacharis* and the *Rebbe*, as he was to be the *chazzan*, was about to go up to the lectern to recite *HaMelech!*; "The King!" The *Rebbe* was much more emotional than usual. The prayers were fervent, and, when he concluded, he left the *shul* to once again immerse himself in the *mikvah* prior to *Tekias Shofar*. The people waited for his return. Finally, he entered the *shul*, his face aglow, prepared for the *Mussaf* prayer.

His head was covered with his *Tallis* as he bent low over the lectern. Silence. The entire congregation stood in silent awe waiting for the *Rebbe* to raise his head and speak. Suddenly, he raised his eyes Heavenward and cried out: "*Ribbono Shel Olam*, if You were to take all of the sins of the Jewish People and place them on one side of your Heavenly scale and then place the lock of hair from that holy woman in our community on the other side, it would demonstrate and define the distinction between the purity and holiness of a Jewish maiden and the impurity of a depraved world: Hashem! For her sake, forgive Your children, *Klal Yisrael!*"

We now have somewhat of an idea of the *yiraas cheit* of Yaakov *Avinu*.