

And they took the blasphemer to the outside of the camp, and stoned him to death. (24:23) The entire assembly removed him to the outside of the camp, they pelted him with stones and he died. (Bamidbar 15:36)

The Torah is teaching us about the punishment meted out to the *mekallel*, blasphemer. In *Sefer Bamidbar*, the Torah relates the punishment which the *mechallel Shabbos*, desecrator of *Shabbos*, received. The *mekoshesh eitzim*, the individual who gathered twigs on *Shabbos*, was stoned, as was the blasphemer. While their punishments were similar, the Torah's description of the actual execution is textually different. With regard to the *mekallel*, the Torah writes, *Vayirgemu oso even*, "They stoned him with *even*," which means one stone. Concerning the *mekoshesh*, however, the Torah writes, *Vayirgemu oso b'avanim*, "They stoned him with stones." Why is the blasphemer stoned with *even*, one stone, while the *mekoshesh* is stoned with *avanim*, many stones?

Horav Yeshayah, zl, m'Prague (quoted in *Nifloasecha Asichah*) explains that the variance lies in the sin and how the nation viewed it. There is no question that the blasphemer's action was an egregious sin, abhorred by the entire nation. When they threw the stones at the blasphemer, it was a collective execution for which there were no detractors. This man was evil. He had committed a heinous crime and was receiving his due punishment. Thus, the Torah writes that he was stoned with *even* – one stone, which describes the collective agreement of the entire nation to be divested of this human scourge.

The *mekoshesh eitzim* was an individual who claimed that he was acting *l'shem Shomayim*, for the sake of Heaven, to teach the nation the stringency of desecrating *Shabbos*. When the people would see the severity of his punishment, they would realize that this was no ordinary sin. There were people, however (those who see only good; who, regardless of the detestable nature of the sin, find some way to excuse or justify the most evil behavior), who were prepared to gloss over the *chillul Shabbos*, even labeling Tzafchad (the name of the *mekoshesh*) as a *tzaddik*, righteous person, for having the "courage" to give up his life, so that others would learn an important lesson. Sadly, such reaction to flagrant sin is not uncommon. Perhaps this is why those who observe Torah and *mitzvos* are in such a minority. When the *mekoshesh* was stoned, it was with *avanim*, many stones. Everyone participated equally (in action), because Hashem had instructed the nation. In their minds, however, there were those who had questions, who were not in agreement. They were not all on the same page. Thus, they threw numerous stones, representing dissenting ideas.

At first, I felt the Torah's wording does not support this exposition. With regard to the *mekoshesh*, the Torah writes *Va'yotziu oso kol ha'eidah*, "And the *eidah*, community, group, took him out." The Torah uses three different terms to describe a community: *tzibbur*; *kehillah*; *eidah*. Obviously, each has a distinct meaning. *Eidah* is derived from the word *eid*, which means witness. The people who constitute an *eidah* agree with one another. They maintain a strong sense of collective identity,

having witnessed and been a part of the same events. They are all focused on a common purpose. Korach's *eidah* was evil. They were all focused on mutiny and impugning Moshe *Rabbeinu's* leadership. An *eidah* is a group of like-minded people bent on a common goal. If this is the case, the people that gathered to enforce Hashem's instructions to execute Tzlafchad were all in agreement, a notion which is inconsistent with the above exposition.

We must, therefore, submit that as far as taking the *mekoshesh* out to be executed, the entire community was like-minded, but when it came to carrying out the judgment against him, they began to hem and haw. This is not uncommon at a time in which an unpleasant decision must be carried out. At first, everyone seems to be on the same page. When the actual deed must be executed, we notice how suddenly (and conveniently) certain individuals just realize that they have a meeting, an appointment, a pressing issue to attend to, etc. Apparently, communities have not changed.