

## They placed him under guard to clarify for themselves through Hashem. (24:12)

The incident of the *megadef*, blasphemer, is a sad entry in the history of our people. It is not as if we have not had wicked, insecure people whose actions against Hashem warranted swift and extreme punishment. He was, however, the first to act so contemptibly. Thus, the punishment to be meted out to him was uncertain. Hashem had to inform Moshe *Rabbeinu* what form of execution – if any – he should receive. He was placed in a holding cell until Hashem clarified his punishment.

The *megadef* was not the only sinner spending his time in a cell. The *mekoshesh eitzim*, who collected sticks on *Shabbos*, was also there. The *mekoshesh* was clearly *mechallel Shabbos*, thus warranting the death penalty, although the manner of execution was yet to be determined. One would think that these two sinners would be sharing a cell. Ultimately, these two were the only two individuals to be incarcerated during *Klal Yisrael's* sojourn in the wilderness. Today, one cannot “choose” one’s cell. Prisoners are lumped together, regardless whether the transgressor is serving time for a misdemeanor or subject to life without parole. The Torah operates differently. The Torah does not recognize a “one size fits all” prison cell.

*Horav Shlomo Wolbe, zl*, explains that Divine judgment is very precise, to the point that sinners who are executed in unlike manners are not buried in the same cemetery. One whose death is by choking is not buried with one whose death came via stoning. Likewise, a murderer is not buried next to a thief. Their punishments are not the same; therefore, neither is their burial site.

The *Mashgiach* quotes *Horav Itzele Peterburger, zl*, who was wont to say that, if two people commit the same sin, but one groaned/felt somewhat remorseful over his actions, his lament is recorded in Heaven – to his favor. While these two sinners transgressed equally, they are not classified together. The difference between them is like night and day.

On the other hand, effort plays a defining role in *mitzvah* performance. Two people may both be learning in the *bais hamedrash*: one is well; the other has a miserable headache. Despite the pain, however, he wants to learn. He will receive greater reward. This idea applies universally to every spiritual endeavor. We must learn to apply a fountainhead approach delving into the origins and backgrounds of people; to understand the reasons that no two people are the same. Family background, acumen, recent crises, all play a role. We no longer need to apply the “one size fits all” to education, we should allow every student to learn at his own pace. Likewise, when a student acts up, it is prudent to investigate whether any changes in his life might be affecting his attention and attitude.

A teenager in *yeshivah* had recently lost his grandmother with whom he was very close. This affected his learning, and eventually, his attitude to *frumkeit*. The *rebbe* was either unaware of the cause of this boy’s digression in learning, or he felt the situation should not have such an adverse

effect. Different students respond to tragedy and crises in various ways. The *rebbe* obviously did not take this into consideration. Thus, he continued to apply pressure on the boy until he rebelled against *yeshivah* and, eventually, *frumkeit*. We have no question that the boy overreacted, but had the *rebbe* investigated whether anything could be having a negative effect on the boy, a tragedy might have been averted. I would like to qualify that I only heard the boy's reason. I wonder whether the *rebbe* has a different perspective.