

The man shall bring his wife to the Kohen, and he shall bring her offering for her, a tenth-eiphah of barley flour; he shall not pour oil over it and shall not put frankincense upon it. (5:15)

Her husband brings the *Minchas Sotah*, meal-offering of the wayward wife. It is not a normal offering in the sense that its ingredients are a reminder of her moral transgression. This *minchah* should invoke within her a confrontation with her profligate past, the activities which brought her here in the first place. All she has to do is confess and correct her ways. In the face of the terrifying fate which will be hers if she refuses to acknowledge her guilt, her obstinacy will be her downfall. Rather than offering a meal-offering consisting of flour, hers is made of barley, a food used for feeding animals, because she disgraced herself by acting in a manner becoming an animal. Her husband does not embellish the offering with oil and frankincense, since incense recalls the fragrance of the Matriarchs, and oil symbolizes light. In contrast, the woman acted in darkness to conceal her sin.

The question that confounds us is: Why are we comparing this woman who has acted like a degenerate to the *Imahos ha'kedoshos*, saintly Matriarchs. She acted like an animal, debasing herself for momentary pleasure. Should we hold her in contempt for not being more like the Matriarchs? How much further can she backslide and distance herself from them?

Horav Moshe Shternbuch, Shlita, derives from here that, although this woman descended to the nadir of immorality to the point that her actions are compared to an animal, she is still held liable for not acting like the Matriarchs. Hashem demands the best from us. He expects us to act with moral rectitude and ethical behavior on the highest level. It is almost as if our transgression elicits a dual punishment: first, for our present contemptible actions; and second, for not aspiring to be like our greatest leaders.

In his *Igeres Teiman*, *Rambam* writes that, although Yaravan ben Nevat was an evil man who not only sinned personally, but was also a *choteh u'machati es ha'rabim*, a sinner who caused others to sin, he is still to be held in contempt for not building a *Succah*! We must remember: One has no exit strategy from Judaism. Once he is fortunate enough to be born a Jew, he must live his life with Torah as his guide. If he does not, he is liable for everything that he has done wrong, as well as for what he has not done right.

How often have we heard a coreligionist whose adherence to Torah and *mitzvos* is little to none, declare, "I do not have to observe that. I am not Orthodox." Jews have no excuses. Torah observance is neither a choice nor a privilege. It is a requisite for every Jew – no excuses.

Rav Shternbach relates an incident which took place concerning the *Gaon, zl, m'Vilna*, while he

was traveling. He stopped at an inn owned by an observant Jew. While he was there a *mumar*, Jewish apostate, asked the innkeeper for a glass of whiskey. The *Gaon* instructed the innkeeper not to give the man whiskey until he first made a *brachah* on it. The apostate refused to recite a blessing, claiming that he is no different from the gentiles who drink without saying a blessing. The apostate thought that since he had abandoned the Torah and *mitzvos*, he was no longer considered a Jew and could now go along his merry way doing whatever he pleased. The *Gra* said to him, "Fool! Do you think that because you are a self-proclaimed *mumar*, you are free of Torah and *mitzvos*? You are obliged to observe every *mitzvah* meticulously. You will receive your due punishment for the transgressions which you committed. Nonetheless, rebelling against Hashem does not absolve you of your responsibility as a Jew." When the man heard this, he shuddered from fear, a fear which ultimately led to his complete repentance and return to Torah and *mitzvos*.

In an alternative approach, *Rav Shterbuch* asserts that the woman should clearly be scorned for her present base actions. When *Chazal* say that she is disdained for not being like the Matriarchs, however, they mean that she has neither recognized their distinction nor used it as an objective to achieve. Had her goals been so noble, had she striven to be like them, she would not have ended up in this abyss. Her lack of ambition to grow was a factor in her downfall. One should set lofty goals for himself and hammer away to achieve whatever he can. The higher one's goal, the greater the chance for success on an elevated level. He might not achieve such outstanding distinction, but he will distance himself from the pit of despair and destruction which would destroy him.

The *Rav* decries the contemporary trend not to pressure students to achieve greatness for fear that it will have a negative effect on them. Obviously, if one sees a student whose emotional soundness cannot tolerate pressure, then he should certainly ease up. Concerning the student who is strong and resilient, however, whose thirst for knowledge is unquenchable, one must push him along in a manner that he is able to negotiate.

The *Brisker Rav*, *zl*, once asked his father, *Horav Chaim Brisker*, *zl*, how is it that he has met a number of laymen who are the paradigm of *middos tovos*, positive character traits, whose refinement in their relationship with their fellow man is impeccable, yet they are sorely deficient in their knowledge of Torah. *Rav Chaim* explained that these men had extraordinary *she'ifos*, ambitions. They strove to become great Torah leaders. Sadly, their goals did not materialize. While they did not make it to the top of the mountain, they at least made it partially. Alternatively, they have sons whom they have imbued with a fervor to reach the apex of Torah achievement. When one sets impressive – but realistic – goals, he will at least move up the ladder. He might not reach the top, but he definitely continues to climb.

An immigrant arrived from Communist Russia at a time when its evil regime was in full power, both in strength and in virulent hatred of the Jewish religion. It was a sealed country. Nonetheless, this man was able to leave, and *Eretz Yisrael* was his destination. A group of *yeshivah* students who heard of the man's arrival went to visit him. They were amazed that he was able to leave, and they

peppered him with questions about the country and the persecution to which everyone, especially Jews, was subjected.

During one of their conversations, the man mentioned that he had a childhood friend, a brilliant boy whose life revolved around learning. Indeed, everyone in their community presaged his emergence one day as a Torah giant without peer. He pondered, "Who knows in what miserable corner of accursed Russia he ended up? Such brilliance to have succumbed to the misery that was our daily fare."

When the *bachurim* heard him describe this extraordinary young scholar, they asked him his name. "His name was Dov Berish Weidenfeld," the man said. When they heard this, they became excited, "*Horav Dov Berish Weidenfeld* is the *Tchebiner Rav*, one of the *gedolei hador*, Torah leaders of our generation. He resides here in Yerushalayim. We will take you to him."

When the man heard this, his entire countenance changed. He began to weep bitterly, as he reiterated over and over, "Oy, Berish, we learned together; we were best friends. Look what became of me, and look what became of you." After the man calmed down he said, "We were both together when the terrible, cruel decrees against the Jews reached our ears. Our reactions were dissimilar. The pressure, fear and pain were too much for me. I maintained my observance to the best of my ability. My friend, on the other hand, threw himself into learning with increased vigor. He withstood the persecution with Torah study as his salve. At first, I attempted to maintain our original schedule of learning, but it was too much. I lost hope and caved in. Now, it is too late. See what became of him, and look at how I contrast him."

No one would blame this man for succumbing to the pain and persecution. How did the *Tchebiner Rav* overcome the adversity that broke so many others? *Sheifah*. He strived for greatness and never gave up hope of reaching the top of the ladder. In the beginning, standing on the first rung and looking up the climb appears impossible, but, with resolution and perseverance, one can make it.