

Now the land was filled with robbery, and behold I shall destroy them from the earth. (6:13)

Chazal (Bereishis Rabbah 31:5) distinguish between *gezel* and *chamas*. While both relieve the victim of his possessions, *gezel* refers to robbery of an item worth at least a *shavah perutah*, value of a *perutah* (smallest coin). *Chamas*, however, refers to robbery of an item which does not have the value of a *perutah*. This is how the people of that generation stole from one another. They came upon a man selling vegetables in the market. One by one the people would take less than the value of a *perutah* of a vegetable, until it was all gone. In other words, it was not individual robbery – but collective robbery, in which an entire group participated. Is it any wonder that Hashem destroyed them all? Certainly, there were some individuals who did not descend to such a nadir, but, since the majority was culpable, everyone paid dearly. When a community sins, it is much more egregious than when disconnected individuals sin. When a community observes and does nothing about an outrage, a shameful activity, the entire community is responsible. It becomes a collective violation. We have had individuals throughout our history who were evil and acted maliciously. They sinned, and they committed crimes. It was, however, an individual breach. We have also had those who have been dissatisfied with acting alone; they have sought to rally and to align themselves with others, to convince a community and create a movement that undermines Torah law and commits evil. This is an entirely different form of corruption, which, unfortunately, takes its toll on everyone. We see how Hashem reacted to the first collective sin. We should exert great vigilance not to be swallowed up by rhetoric whose only purpose is to garner support for the iniquity the rhetoric espouses. One assuages his own guilty conscience when he feels that he is not the only one acting counter to Hashem. Convincing others to join him is his selfish manner of sharing the blame.