RABBI JUDAH MISCHEL

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Dedicated L'Iluy Nishmas HaChaver Shlomo Michael ben Meir z'l

Fortunate Are We!

Rebbe Pinchas of Koretz, zy'a, was a contemporary and friend of the Baal Shem Tov, known for his righteous ways and uncompromising commitment to *emes*. The talmidim of Reb Pinchas learned their teacher's way of direct and open honesty. It is said that those who followed the path of Koretz did not speak unless they were certain that what they were saying was absolutely true. Two of the great talmidim of Reb Pinchas, who later became Rebbes in their own right, were Rebbe Aryeh Leib, the "Zeide of Shpole", and Rebbe Refael of Barshad.

One Leil Shabbos, while surrounded by his chasidim, the Shpoler Zeide seemed troubled and heaved a heavy sigh: "I'm afraid that I lit candles too late today. I may have been *mechalel Shabbos* — Oy, I think I've inadvertently desecrated the holiness of Shabbos!" Anguished, he covered his face with his hands and sunk down, deep in thought.

One by one, the chasidim attempted to strengthen their Rebbe, each one with his own way of trying to justify and explain the situation: "It can't be, no wrongdoing can befall a tzaddik!" "Rebbe, there must have been some confusion about the time." "Hashem watches over the righteous." After numerous expressions of chizuk and comfort, the Shpoler Zeide's old friend Reb Refael of Barshad spoke up: "Even the mere possibility of unintended *chillul Shabbos* is extremely severe and must be taken to heart! *B'vadai*, certainly, it is incumbent upon the Rebbe to do *teshuvah*!"

The chasidim present gasped in horror. While they were accustomed to openness and honesty, and were aware the two were friends, addressing the Rebbe in such a way was unprecedented, even outrageous. All eyes were fixed nervously on the Shpoler Zeidy waiting for his reaction.

Raising his head, the Rebbe's teary eyes lit up and a smile spread across his face. Turning to the chasidim, he spoke words of rebuke: "Had I been swayed by your empty reassurances, who knows? I might have lived the rest of my life without doing *teshuvah* for this! Reb Refael, I owe you my life!"

Among the many categories of *korbanos* outlined in this week's sedra are the various people obligated to bring a *korban chatas*, sin offering, as an atonement for mistakes, whether made by the Kohen Gadol, members of the community or the king:

אֲשֶׁר נָשִׂיא יֶחֱטָא וְעָשָׂה אַחַת מִכָּל־מִצְוֹת ה׳ אֱלֹקיו אֲשֶׁר לֹא־תֵעָשֶׂינָה בִּשְׁגֻגָה וְאָשֵׁם: אוֹ־הוֹדַע אֵלָיו חַטָּאתוֹ אֲשֶׁר חָטָא בָּהּ וְהֵבִיא אֶת־קָרְבָּנוֹ שְׂעִיר עִזִּים זָכָר תָּמִים:

"If a leader of Israel sins and unintentionally commits one of all the commandments of Hashem which may not be committed, and he realizes his guilt, or the sin of which he is guilty is brought to his knowledge — he shall bring as his offering a male goat without blemish." (4:22-23)

Rashi points out a textual shift in our *pasuk*. Instead of the Torah using the word אִם, "if" as is used earlier in our *perek* to introduce a scenario in which someone sins, our verse employes a different, less commonly used term to express "if": אשר. Rashi says this term is reminiscent of אַשְׁרֵי, 'fortunate is…' Reading our *pasuk* this way, it means, 'Fortunate is (the generation whose) leader… does not hold himself too high, but rather, he gives attention to bringing an atonement offering for his unintentional sins; and how much more so will he experience remorse for the sins he has committed willfully.'

The Torah is pointing out a subtle but important perspective on our leaders and ourselves. One is not meant to be perfect, beyond reproach. In fact, the opposite is true. *Ashrei* — fortunate are we whose leaders are fallible and admit wrongdoing.

Rav Yitzchak Hutner, zt'l, pointed out the danger in emphasizing the successes of our

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leaders, or focusing solely on the brilliance, spiritual accomplishments and lofty levels of avodah achieved by the *gedolei yisrael*, without recognizing their struggles, mistakes and failures along the way. Recognizing that our leaders are imperfect and that we have no expectation otherwise can be a great source of strength. Learning how giants of spirit and righteous people handle setbacks and missteps is far more constructive than misplaced adulation and a false expectation of perfection.

As Rav Hutner explains in a powerful letter to a talmid who was struggling, the true measure of greatness is growing and learning from our failures. "The tzaddik may fall seven times, and rises" (*Mishlei*, 24:16) This does not mean that one achieves 'greatness' from rising after a fall; the experience of stumbling itself is the source of his spiritual efforts and achievements. Instead of sweeping failures under the rug and pretending they didn't happen, a great leader — and we, as well — can *value* our failures as spiritual springboards.

As Pesach approaches, we are focused on cleaning chametz from our homes. To search out our dwelling places for leaven is also to examine our lives for crumbs of the *yeitzer hara*. There are limits to what one is expected to achieve in this endeavor. The Sfas Emes (*Bereishis*, 1:1) explains that inherent in God's design is man's imperfection. Although we aspire to greatness, what greatness actually means requires some clarification. The *Talmidei haBaal Shem Tov* drew an understanding of our spiritual responsibility from the mitzvah of *bedikas chametz* on Erev Pesach. Halachically, we are obligated to search for 'leaven' עד מקום שידו מגעת והשער מבטל בליבו, "as far as the hand can reach, and the rest is the work of the heart (*Pesachim*, 8a). We are to yearn in our heart for perfection, and yet it is not upon us to complete the task.

Ashreinu, fortunate are we, that we, *Am Yisrael*, have been given the *Korban Chatas*, an opportunity to repair that which we have broken and to draw close to Hashem through honestly admitting error and embracing our imperfection. Like the Shpoler Zeide, may we keep the company of friends, teachers and students who will guide us and accompany us on a path of honesty, spiritual development and growth. And may we clean our homes of *chametz*, and purify our hearts as well, in preparation for our redemption this Pesach. ■

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