

Making Mistakes Can Be A Good Thing!

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It was said in the name of Rav: “If all the seas were black ink, and the marshes were quills, and the heavens were parchments, and all the people were scribes, they would not suffice to record the depth of the mind of the government” (Bavli, Shabbat 11a).

Rashi explains that a king must be mindful of countless matters – every day, there are taxes to collect, conflicts to be resolved, and judgments to be passed in each of the provinces of his realm. The Gemara is thus teaching in a poetic style that one should always pray for the well-being of the government and not suspect it of wrongdoing. In the words of the Meiri: the workings of a government are so complex, that its intent behind any particular operation cannot be easily discerned. Therefore, if one sees the government engaged in something that seems to be improper, he should give it the benefit of the doubt!

(A very different interpretation of this Gemara is given by Sefat Emet. True, a king requires this high degree of intelligence to run his country successfully, but as a mortal he cannot possibly have it. Only God, the supreme King of kings, is capable of such a task, he argues!)

Perhaps this is why in Chapter 4 of our parsha other people are described as only possibly sinning (*Im*) – “**if** the anointed priest sins...” (v. 3), “**if** the whole congregation of Israel strays unintentionally...” (v. 13)... “**if** one of the common people sins unintentionally...” (v. 27). By contrast, the Nasi is **bound** to sin: “**When** (*Asher*) a leader sins unintentionally...” (4:22). If a leader does not sin, it shows he is not fully engaged in making the myriad decisions required in order to properly run his country. “If a person does nothing, he won’t make any mistakes,” is a common Israeli expression!

Indeed, our great Biblical leaders often sinned or made errors of judgment, such as King David, who insisted on counting the people (Shmuel Bet, Ch. 24) or Yoshiyahu, King of Judah, who went out to fight against Paroh Necho despite Yirmiyahu the Prophet’s warning (Divrei Hayamim II, 20-22).

Rabbenu Bechaye (4:22) goes as far as to say that while the Cohen Gadol will be cautious about sinning (which is why the Torah records only that he *may* sin), the Nasi is far more likely to sin, “because his heart is extremely proud, and the trait of pride, which is the cause of the sin, is prevalent with him due to his lofty dominion.”

Yet, as Rashi expounds based on Midrash Sifra, a Nasi who has erred can perform a great Kiddush Hashem by doing teshuva: “Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai said: Praiseworthy (*Ashrei* – a play on the word *Asher*) is the generation whose leader brings a sin offering for his inadvertent sins.”

Named for the crown-like spikes on its surface, the coronavirus has reminded all of us of our fallibility and humility before God. Even a coronated king of Israel must wait for his stable boy to come make up a minyan! Wishing a refuah sheleima to everyone afflicted with this infectious disease.