



Vayikra: Failure & Forgiveness

Rabbi Shmuel Silber

Alexander Pope wrote, *“To err is human; to forgive, divine.”* From the moment we are first introduced to Adam in the beginning of Genesis it is clear that man is prone to falling and failing. In this week’s Parsha the Torah begins the lengthy section detailing sacrificial law. There are offerings brought for thanksgiving and celebration and there are offerings brought for atonement in the aftermath of sin. There are sacrifices for the mistakes of the common man and there are special sacrificial rites for the sins of the leader.

“If a leader [of Israel] sins and unintentionally commits one of all the commandments of the Lord, which may not be committed, incurring guilt; if his sin that he has committed is made known to him, then he shall bring his offering: an unblemished male goat (Vayikra 4:22).”

In this verse the Torah describes the events that occur if the *Nasi*, the leader of the Jewish people, inadvertently issues an erroneous halachik ruling (permitting that which is prohibited) and acts upon his own ruling (thereby committing a sin). The verses describe the special sacrificial service to atone for his transgression.

The Talmud (*Horiyos* 10b) makes an incredible statement: *“Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakai said: Praiseworthy (ASHREI) is the generation whose leader brings a sin-offering for his inadvertent transgression.”*¹

Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakai teaches us that it can be difficult for one in a leadership position to admit he has done something wrong. The leader may be concerned about his image, about his ability to “lead” in the aftermath of an admission of guilt. And so, praiseworthy is the leader who is able to admit his faults, seek atonement and attempt to restore his spiritual standing.

But shouldn’t the Talmud have reserved its praise for the leader who has not sinned at all? Shouldn’t Rabbi Yochanan save his “ASHREI” accolade for the leader who does not suffer a spiritual lapse? Such a leader can serve as incredible role model for his constituents and followers. *If our leader can remain above temptation, if our leader can avoid the spiritual and physical pitfalls of life – we can as well.* Why not laud the *Nasi* who never suffered the set-back rather than the praising the one who did?

Rav Menachem Dovid of Amshinov (1850-1918) explains that in fact the reverse is true. A leader who has not suffered personal failure will be unable to forgive the shortcomings of another. A leader who has never tasted the bitterness of personal defeat will not appreciate the struggles of those he must lead. The leader who always succeeds will look at those who do not with a sense of disdain and resentment. Therefore, Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakai says, *“Praiseworthy is the generation whose leader has stumbled, for this is a leader who will understand, appreciate and empathize with the difficulties his flock must face.”*

The words of the Amshinover resonate with incredible personal relevance. We all stumble, fall and suffer set-backs along the journey of life. We have tasted the bitterness of defeat and have felt the pain of self-doubt. These experiences must sensitize and allow us to be accepting of the faults and shortcomings of the other. It is precisely because we know how frail we are that we must accept the frailties of those around us. It is because we know how much we yearn to be forgiven for our transgressions that we must be quick to dispense forgiveness to those who wrong us.

“Praiseworthy is the generation whose members recognize their own failures and are able to forgive and accept the shortcomings of others.”

¹ Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakai is making a play on words. The verse uses the word “ASHER” (that), which sounds like the word “ASHREI” (praiseworthy).