

CENTER FOR MODERN TORAH LEADERSHIP

Center for Modern Torah Leadership



חרות ואחריות

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"Taking Responsibility for Torah"

ARE LEADERS MORE LIKELY TO SIN?

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Chapter 4 of *Vayikra* is organized around a list of three sin-offerings: those of the High Priest (the anointed priest, **הכהן המשיח**), of the Sanhedrin (the eyes of the generation, **עיני העדה**), and of the king (the one raised up, **נשיא**). Each offering is given a full legal exposition. The list is preceded by a one-sentence reference to the sin of a generic sinner, with no reference to a resultant offering. This introduction seems misplaced, as it apparently related to a series of cases in Chapter 5. It seems likely that the Torah interjects the sin-offerings of leaders to emphasize that leaders are human too, no less fallible than their followers.

One category of Jewish leader is missing from the list. *Yirmiyahu* 2:8 refers to the sins of four kinds of Jewish leader:

הכהנים לא אמרו איה ה'
ותפשי התורה לא ידעו
והרעים פשעו בי
והנביאים נבאו בבעל
ואחרי לא יעלו הלכו

The priests did not say "Where is Hashem?"

Those who grasp the Torah did not know Me

The shepherds breached their duty toward Me

And the prophets prophesied via Baal,

and after those who cannot be effective, they followed.

On the assumption that "those who grasp the Torah" refers to scholars, and that "shepherds" refers to secular political leaders, the category missing in *Vayikra* 4 is that of prophets. Why does the Torah not include a sin-offering for prophets?

Now *Vayikra* discusses accidental (**שוגג**=*shogeg*) sins, whereas *Yirmiyah* seems pretty clearly to be describing deliberate sins. So an immediately apparent possible

resolution is that prophets cannot sin *beshogeg*. Why might that be? Let's be clear that we are discussing sins that these leaders commit in their official capacities, not in their private lives. How might a high priest, member of the Sanhedrin, or a king sin accidentally in their official capacities?

Here I think it is necessary to retranslate *shogeg*. Non-deliberate sin occurs in many forms: one can act unconsciously out of habit, misexecute a physical plan, or have the consequences of one's actions altered by unpredictable external forces. None of these is the referent of our verses. They relate at least primarily to errors of judgment.

Now it is pretty clear where judgment enters into the official roles of the Sanhedrin and king. What about the High Priest, however? I suggest that there is one circumstance in which the High Priest exercises official judgment unique to his position, which is when he reads the *Urim veTummim*.

In *I Samuel* 1:13, Eli the High Priest sees Channah praying silently and angrily accuses her of being drunk – **עד מתי** תשתכרין. Channah responds: **לא**

אדני

אשה קשת רוח אנכי

ויין ושכר לא שתיתי

Not

my master

I am a woman with a hardened spirit

and neither wine nor intoxicant=שכר have I drunk.

Rashi in the current printed edition comments:

"לא אדוני" – לא אדון אתה

בדבר הזה גלית בעצמך שאין רוח הקודש שורה עליך

שתדע שאיני שכורת יין

The mission of the Center for Modern Torah Leadership is to foster a vision of fully committed halakhic Judaism that embraces the intellectual and moral challenges of modernity as spiritual opportunities to create authentic leaders. The Center carries out its mission through the Summer Beit Midrash program, the Rabbis and Educators Professional Development Institute, the Campus and Community Education Institutes, weekly Divrei Torah and our website, www.torahleadership.org, which houses hundreds of articles and audio lectures.

“Not my master” – You are not a master

By saying this you have revealed that the Holy Spirit does not rest on you or you would know that I was not wine-drunk.

Rashi makes two related radical claims. First, he removes the comma between “not” and “my master” so that Channah is not respectfully disagreeing with Eli but rather denying his authority. Secondly, Channah’s response is not limited to her case, but rather a broad assertion of Eli’s spiritual inadequacy. One problem with this reading is that, as Rashi points out, Channah pleads with Eli in the next verse, he blesses her, and the blessing bears fruit in the birth of Shmuel, who grows up venerating Eli to the point that he cannot distinguish between G-d’s voice and Eli’s. Why would Channah change her mind about Eli, when he had in fact accused her falsely? Indeed, Eli’s angry initial reaction to Channah seems wildly excessive.

The Vilna Gaon in *Kol Eliyahu* reports a version of Rashi which begins כשרה – “לא אדני”. In high school, I recall, this was explained to me as follows. Rabbi Yochanan (*Yoma* 73) says that the way the *Urim veTummim* conveyed G-d’s will was by having the letters carved into the stones of the breastplate light up, but that this would work only for a High Priest on whom the Divine Spirit rests. Why? Possibly the letters lit up simultaneously, and the High Priest had to rearrange them to determine their message. Here, Eli arranged the letters to form שכרה, drunk, when in fact Channah was כשרה, kosher.

However, if my memory is correct, I was taught incorrectly. The Gaon actually explains Rashi on the basis of a *midrash* which compares Channah to Sarah, Rivkah, and Rachel (all of whom had fertility issues). In other words, he reads כשרה as *k’Sarah*, like Sarah, not as *ksheirah*, kosher. Apparently my teacher as well lacked the Divine Spirit.

With trepidation, I venture to suggest an interpretation of this Rashi that differs from the Gaon’s. Rashi to *Yoma* 73 emphasizes that the letters would not light up at all for a High Priest who lacked the Divine Spirit. In other words, Eli’s error demonstrated the opposite of Channah’s accusation; it was an error that could be made only by one on whom the Divine Spirit did rest. Once Eli acknowledged his error, she was more than happy to accept a blessing from him, and rightly so. Had Eli insisted she was drunk, however, Channah would simply have rejected him; she knew this was impossible. The dialogue between Eli and Channah is a delicate dance of authority and suspicion. Channah cannot tell whether Eli is merely pretending to have the Divine Spirit with him until he admits

error, which demonstrated his strength of character. To regain his status as אדני, ironically, he has to surrender any pretension that access to Revelation makes him infallible. Once Channah knows which letters have lit up, she is more capable than he is of interpreting their meaning.

The Sanhedrin, when it transforms Torah into law, and the king, when he carries out the Torah as law, are in the same position as the High Priest once it is known which letters have lit up. In other words, they may not claim that their interpretations of Torah are infallible. They too can sin accidentally by misunderstanding Revelation.

However, the errors of the High Priest and of the Sanhedrin will result from textual misinterpretations, whereas the errors of the king will likely result from political miscalculation. I suspect it is harder to admit political error. Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai (*Sifra* 5) notes that whereas the sins of the High Priest and Sanhedrin are introduced by the preposition כי, that of the king is introduced by אשר. He suggests that אשר=when is a play-on words with אשרי=fortunate, because a generation is indeed fortunate if it has a leader who will admit to making a political misjudgment.

To return to our opening question: why is there no sacrifice for an erring prophet? I suggest that the High Priest, the king, and the Sanhedrin are all interpreting objectively accessible data, even if in the case of the High Priest the data is obtained via some form of Divine Spirit. By contrast, a prophet cannot convey the objective content of his Revelation to anyone; the language he uses is already an interpretation of his experience rather than the experience itself. G-d can tell Yirmiyahu “You have seen well,” but no human being could ever determine whether this was so.

A classic parody of an admission goes as follows: “I have never been wrong. Once, I thought I had erred. But *barukh Hashem*, I was mistaken!” The point here is that an admission of past error is pointless unless it generates an admission of fallibility. To be sure that one was wrong, solely on the basis of one’s own judgment, is no less arrogant than one’s original certitude of correctness. Prophets are offered no ritual route to atonement for misjudgments. This, I suspect, is why they so often find their status painful. G-d in His wisdom and mercy has given the rest of us an objective basis for the study of His will, and we should be constantly grateful for the possibility of *chavruta*. *Shabbat Shalom!*

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