

When

Why does the Torah portray the king's sin as inevitable?

In the midst of our Parsha, when discussing the Korban Chatat of various communal leaders, God says:

אֲשֶׁר נָשִׂיא יִחַטָּא וְעָשָׂה אַחַת מִכָּל־מִצְוֹת ה' אֲלֵקִיו אֲשֶׁר לֹא־תַעֲשֶׂינָהּ בְּשִׁגְגָה וְאָשָׁם:

When a prince who incurs guilt by doing unwittingly any of the things which by the commandment of the LORD his God ought not to be done, and he realizes his guilt—

This is a strange statement. For all of the other sin offerings, the Torah says “If” they sinned. However, for the Nasi, which our sages interpreted as the King, the Torah uses the word “When”. Why is it inevitable for a king to sin?

According to the Seforno, that is exactly the point:

When the King (or political head) sins; there is no conditional word אם, “if,” i.e. the Torah considers it as almost a given that the political head of the people will become guilty of at least an inadvertent sin.

Rather than asking why it is assumed that kings will sin, the Seforno says that obviously it is assumed that kings will sin. Kings mess up; it is one of the consequences of governing. However, Rashi has a positive spin on this:

The word אשר is connected in meaning with אשרי “happy”. Happy is the generation whose prince (king) takes care to bring an atonement sacrifice even for an inadvertent act of his; how much the more certain is it that he will do penance for his wilful sins.

Rather than an inevitability that a king will sin, Rashi focuses on the joy that comes from a king who is aware of his mistakes and is willing to atone for them, even inadvertent sins.

We can learn from both of these commentaries, not just for our governments, but for ourselves. Sin is inevitable; we are all going to make mistakes. However, it is crucial for us to be aware of our sins and try to atone for them. And if we are aware of our faults, rather than it being a negative, it is a joy for us. If we are willing to learn from our mistakes, we should be happy.