

The challenge for anyone who leads is that when faced with a controversial decision, one where there are strong opinions or feelings on different sides, someone will be hurt or angered by the choice that is made. Helping one side often means others feel wronged. In this week's *parasha* there is a subtle, but important difference between the punishment meted out to a leader for the wrongdoing they may do.

For wrongs committed by a priest, judge – or even the people – Torah uses the word **אם** “if they should sin”. But when referring to sins of the political ruler (the **נשיא**), the word used is **אשר** “When a leader unintentionally incurs guilt by doing any of the things which by the commandment of his God ought not to be done, and that realizes guilt.” (Leviticus 4:22).

The sage Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai said that the Hebrew word **אשרי** “happy” about acknowledging a wrong? Because is so rare, for any generation where leaders are willing to admit their mistakes is “happy” indeed (*Tosefta, Bava Kamma* 7:5). To lead takes courage – on the one hand, the strength and vision to take a stand; on the other hand, to be humble enough to realize when the position one takes may have created more harm than good.

When the ancient prophet Nathan challenged King David, the king admitted his wrongdoing. His prayer of contrition is a model for how a leader can and should step back, change direction and apologize for what was done. David's prayers are so memorable, in part, because they are so rare – for leaders all too often take a position and refuse to listen to the rebuke of others or take heed of the divisiveness their decisions may be causing that bring more harm than good. What do we do in such a time when a leader refuses to admit guilt, or even worse, obstinately doubles down out of fear of appearing weak, indecisive or compromising?

Surely, the State of Israel we are seeing this with the current coalition government in the Knesset. The ongoing attempt of Netanyahu government to push through judicial reforms (about which I will have more to say next Shabbat) is dangerous enough. But consider other words and actions of the government of

Israel in recent weeks. Several weeks ago, Finance Minister Betzael Smotrich said Israel should “wipe out” a Palestinian town under Israeli control because some terrorists came from there and murdered two Israelis. Sure, he offered a perfunctory apology that it was a “slip of the tongue” but when he claimed this week that the Palestinian people are an “invention” while standing behind a map of “Greater Israel” that includes modern-day Jordan he revealed his true intent – to deny the reality of a people's identity.

If that wasn't bad enough, Transportation Minister Miri Regev decided to publicly bemoan the fact that she “really didn't like Dubai and won't be returning (though they have some nice roads there).” Only a few months ago Jews around the world were celebrating the warming ties between the UAE and Israel that came from the Abraham Accords. Her words only exacerbated a growing concern of UAE leaders, who this week meet with Prime Minister Netanyahu to say that treatment of Palestinians is straining ties between the countries.

Adding fuel to the fire, the Knesset passed a law to reverse the 2005 Disengagement Law that allows Israelis to return to four settlement areas in the northern West Bank that were evacuated 2005 and to rebuild the settlement of Homesh – which contradicts the agreement Israel has had with the United States. So angered was the U.S. government that in a rare rebuke between the U.S. and Israel, Israeli Ambassador to the United States Michael Herzog was summoned to the State Department for a dressing down over this week's legislative decision.

Then there is Itamar Ben-Gvir, the far-right party called Otzma Yehudit, or Jewish Power, who has been convicted on at least eight charges, including supporting a terrorist organization and incitement to racism. This week he cancelled canceled a 3 million shekel (\$817,000) allocation to fight crime in Israel's Arab community because the program is run by the American Joint Distribution Committee, which Ben-Gvir decided is a “radical leftist organization.” Despite the lack of evidence of such an outrageous claim, what kind of leader seeks to stop a program meant to decrease crime? The program focuses on the need for social welfare and educational activities in the community,

supplementing the traditional roles of the police. This is truly a sin, for his portfolio in the government involves stemming the tide of violence in the Arab community of Israel (20% of the population, mind you). What is the motivation? We can only imagine his hatred of Arabs, antithetical to Jewish values and Israel's very Declaration of Independence.

And, if all of this were not enough, I suspect that I do not need to spell out to you the growing civil unrest in Israel, at times with nearly half a million Israelis (the equivalent of 20 million Americans per capita) against the moves by this government.

Next week I will expand on the dangers I see in this for not only the relationship of the United States and Israel, in how this harms us as a Jewish community here, and how this is even making Israel less secure to defend itself against enemies.

The message from this week's *parasha* could not be clearer. As Rabbi Josh Weinberg wrote this week: "When a leader sins – **אֲשֶׁר נָשִׂיא יַחֲטֵא**, it carries greater weight than when one of the people sins. Netanyahu's sins – those for which he is on trial and those which have led to his fanning the flames of extremist and dangerous leaders to rise to significant power – are sending the country into the abyss." Instead of a recognition that Israel is on the wrong track, Bibi and his coalition are doubling down.

Make no mistake, the danger to internal cohesion within Israel has never been greater. And, I fear, the divisiveness is spreading here – and the Jewish community will be torn asunder, a "baseless hatred" of one for the other that will weaken our people in Israel and around the world.

What is there for us to do? The rabbis of the Talmud make it clear that when there is a wrong before us, if the wrongdoer does not relent or admit their sin, we must act. Thus, we learn, "Whoever can protest to his (or her) household and does not, is accountable [for the sins] in that home. If a person has the power and status to speak out against the wrongdoing in one's community, one must; and if not, that individual is accountable for the sins in the community. And if we can

protest to the whole world, but do not, we are accountable for the whole world" (Babylonian Talmud, *Shabbat* 54b).

The time for our silence is long past. Torah is clear. If a leader bears guilt, they must turn from it. If not, our traditions demand that we rise up to challenge those leading us down a dangerous path. Do not wait for the government of Israel to enact laws this coming week that will harm the Jewish State, are antithetical to the values of our traditions and will weaken us all as Jews. Speak out. Join me in contacting your elected congressional representatives and local Israeli diplomats hear your concerns as people who love and care deeply about Israel and that we are deeply concerned about its future. As lovers of Israel we must not give up. In fact, we must become ever more engaged, for if not now, when.