

# MESHECH CHOCHMAH

## Parshas Chukas

### Between “Israel” and “The Congregation”

וְאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר יִטְמָא וְלֹא יִתְחַטֵּא וְנִכְבְּרְתָה הַנֶּפֶשׁ הַהִוא מִתּוֹךְ הַקִּהָל כִּי אֶת מִקְדָּשׁ ה' טָמָא

*A man who becomes impure and does not purify himself, that person shall be cut off from the midst of the congregation, for he has contaminated the Sanctuary of Hashem (19:20)*

The beginning of our parsha deals with matters of *tumas meis* – impurity contracted through contact with a dead body. Our pasuk states that if a person has become *tamei* and then enters the Mishkan without first purifying himself (through immersion in a *mikveh* and having the *parah adumah* water sprinkled on him), that person is liable to the punishment of *kares* – being cut off from the Jewish people.

#### CLOSE COMPARISON

It is interesting to compare our pasuk with an earlier which seems to have already stated the above message. Pasuk 13 reads:

כָּל הַנִּגַּע בְּמֵת בְּנֶפֶשׁ הָאָדָם אֲשֶׁר יָמוּת וְלֹא יִתְחַטֵּא אֶת מִשְׁכַּן ה' טָמָא וְנִכְבְּרְתָה הַנֶּפֶשׁ הַהִוא מִיִּשְׂרָאֵל

*Whoever touches the dead body of a person who died and will not have purified himself, he will have contaminated the Tabernacle of Hashem, that person shall be cut off from Israel.*

Upon close inspection, we note two differences between these pesukim:

- ▶ Pasuk 13 refers to a person contaminating Hashem’s Mishkan (Tabernacle), while pasuk 20 refers to one who contaminates His Mikdash (Sanctuary).
- ▶ Pasuk 13 states that this person shall be cut off from “Israel”, while pasuk 20 says that he will be cut off from “The Congregation”.

What is behind these discrepancies?

## **THE FUNCTION OF KARES**

The Meshech Chochmah that these two pesukim reflect two different elements within *kares*. On a simple level, the punishment relates entirely to the person himself: Having transgressed such a serious prohibition, he has thereby forfeited the right to be connected to the Jewish people, and hence, is cut off from them. However, there is an additional aspect to this situation, which relates to the Jewish people themselves.

By way of analogy: A living being consists of life-force which resides within a body. The life-force exists as one entity in the body and is present in each and every part of it. This means that if a part of the body should deteriorate to a sufficiently chronic degree, it then compromises the quality of the life-force within the body as a whole. Under such circumstances, it may be necessary to remove that affected part to ensure the life and function of the rest of the body.

Likewise, the Jewish people are like one body, in which the Life-Force of the Divine Presence resides. Each individual Jew is a part of that body, as a result of which, the Shechinah that resides in Israel as a whole resides in him as well. As such, it is possible that if an individual deteriorates to the point that he can no longer contain the Divine Presence, he threatens to impair the rest of The Body Israel's capacity to do so. Therefore, his punishment of *kares* exists not only as a response to his own wrongdoing, but also to ensuring the continued spiritual function of the rest of the Jewish people!

## **ARVUS – EXPRESSING UNITY**

The concept of interconnectedness between the Jewish people receives full halachic expression in the concept of *arvus* – inter-accountability, whereby all Jews are responsible and accountable the actions of all other Jews. This halachah receives expression both in the positive and negative realm:

- ▶ In the positive realm: It is the basis of the idea that one can be motzi another person in a mitzvah even if the one performing the mitzvah has already fulfilled his own obligation. This is because he remains obligated to see that others fulfil their mitzvah, essentially having some part in *their* obligation.
- ▶ In the negative realm: A person is held accountable for another's wrongdoing, if there is something he could have done to prevent it.

The concept of *arvus*, therefore, represents the concept of the people as one unified entity. It is important to note that this element did not apply to the Jewish people immediately upon receiving the Torah. In fact, the Gemara<sup>1</sup> states that *arvus* was initiated at the time when they crossed the Jordan River into the land of Israel.

## **MISHKAN AND MIKDASH**

This brings us to the terms "Mishkan" and "Mikdash". In discussing the Torah's use of both these terms, the Gemara<sup>2</sup> notes that the term "Mishkan" refers to the Mishkan which accompanied us in the midbar, while the term "Mikdash" refers to the Beis Hamikdash, which was to be built in the land of Israel.

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1 Sanhedrin 43b, based on Devarim 28:29.

2 Shavuos 16b.

Based on all the above, it is possible to appreciate the differences in nuance between our two pesukim, understanding them as referring to two time-frames, with the punishment of *kares* assuming an additional function as we moved from the first time-frame to the second.

- Pasuk 20, which mentions a person who is *tamei* contaminating the **Mishkan**, is referring to the period in the midbar; therefore, since there was not yet a concept of *arvus* representing the unity of the Jewish people, the punishment of *kares* is described in terms of him being “cut off **from Israel**” – i.e. having forfeited his right to be counted among them.
- Pasuk 13, which talks of such a person contaminated the **Mikdash**, is referring to the period after we would cross into the land of Israel. At that stage, *arvus* would already apply, indicating that we would have achieved a state of unified entity. As that stage, the punishment of *kares* assumes the additional function of allowing the rest of that entity to function unimpaired, and hence the *kares* is phrased in terms of him being “cut off **from the congregation**,” a term which highlights the assembly of the Jewish people into a composite unity.