

**D'var Torah: THE SEVEN SINS**  
**by Rabbi David Algaze**

The parasha Bechukotai analyzes the consequences of our actions and it serves as a powerful treatise on spiritual illnesses. From the first verse, "If you will follow My decrees and observe My commandments..." (Vayikra 26:3) to the end of a long and detailed list of tragic consequences for our misbehavior (tochecha) this section deals extensively with the process of alienation from G-d and its ultimate repercussions in our lives.

On verse 14, the Torah initiates a description of this process of estrangement and this process is illuminated by Rashi. The chain reaction is started by not studying Torah. The absence of Torah study robs us of the knowledge to perform the mitzvot but more importantly it prevents us from having the energy to engage in a life filled with mitzvot and the strength to counter the negative influence of the yetzer hara (wayward inclination). The second step in this process is then the abandonment of the commandments. Rashi pauses to inform us that "here are two sins." Why this remark? Perhaps Rashi is telling us that when a person stops studying and reflecting, that is a sin in and of itself. We sin not only when the consequence arrives, namely stop performing mitzvot, but when we stop studying Torah. The error that originates everything is when we cease to occupy ourselves with Torah.

The consequence of not doing the mitzvot is that the person dislikes the people who do observe (third sin). The reason for this negative emotion is that a person feels guilty and he displaces this feeling onto the people who still observe faithfully and who, indirectly, are making him feel inadequate. He has pangs of conscience when he sees that others are still loyal to the word of G-d. The fourth step is also natural: hating the Rabbis who teach the Torah and its obligatory character. This is because they are the symbol of Torah observance and the ones who teach it and expound on it. The question is why should hating the Rabbis be different from "rejecting those who keep the mitzvot"? Is it not one and the same? The answer may be that one may dislike the people who do the mitzvot while still maintaining a healthy respect for the scholarship and wisdom of the Rabbis. Theoretically, one could be angry with observant people but still maintain a sense of appreciation for Torah learning and its students. However, the Torah informs us that when one begins to dislike the people who observe because they make us feel guilty, the consequence will be that we would not be able to appreciate even the intellectual achievements of Jewish scholarship and insight.

The fifth step in this process is to prevent others from doing the mitzvot. We can understand that this too stems from guilt feelings and an attempt to void them. But why is this step different from the third one, the hating of observant people? And why does this follow after the hatred of the Rabbis and not after the hatred of observant people? The answer is that when one rejects the wisdom of the Rabbis and disregards their wisdom, one starts a new "philosophy" that develops non-observance into a new theory. Like anarchists who hate government, these new philosophers regard observance as an atavistic and antiquated way and they want to prevent others from observing the mitzvot. Hence, the next step is to deny the divine origin of the commandments. This is compatible with this new philosophy whose goal is to assuage a guilty conscience.

However, the seventh step is not logically comprehensible. Why should a person wish to deny the existence of G-d? Once he has already disengaged himself from the obligation to perform the commandments, as was done in the previous steps of the process, what advantage does he gain from denying the existence of G-d? He already freed himself from the commandments, what does it bother him that there is a G-d? Rav Henschel Leibowitz answers that Man is intrinsically honest. As Kohelet puts it (7:29), "The L-rd created Man straight." In the depth of his soul Man knows the truth. He knows there is a G-d in the world, he knows that G-d placed before us a set of obligations, of values and mitzvot which we are obligated to fulfill. Therefore, when he denies the commandments he feels a deep sense of guilt and stirrings that move him to return to G-d. Man needs to be logically consistent. Thus, if he refuses to analyze these feelings of guilt and where they lead him and does not accept the path of teshuva (return), he feels the need to combat these feelings. This is because the pangs of his conscience are inexorably leading him back to reconsider his life and are actually pushing him back to G-d. Thus, in order to achieve logical consistency and inner honesty, he needs to deny G-d Himself and do the opposite of what his soul is demanding. Only then he can—to his detriment-- regain his calm.

The lesson from this is that a person cannot long remain in the position of denying the mitzvot without also in the end rejecting G-d Himself. A person needs to decide where he stands and obey the voice within his soul and return to G-d. Otherwise, the tragic consequence will be that he will attempt to counter his guilt feelings in the negative direction of ultimately rejecting G-d.

A positive insight from this analysis is that so long as a person maintains the belief in G-d, he is still able to do teshuva, no matter how far he may have drifted away from a life of Torah and mitzvot. Finally, just as the abandonment of Torah study leads this process downwards, the studying of Torah and the contemplation of its wisdom and insights can make a person initiate the path of return.