

The Limits of Forgiveness (Shelach)

We are free to choose our actions, but we are not free to choose the consequences of those actions. – Stephen R. Covey

What do the following serious transgressions have in common?

- Blasphemy
- Idol worship
- Violating Shabbat
- Prohibited sexual actions
- Eating chametz on Passover
- Eating or working on Yom Kippur

According to the Mishna (Kritut 1:1), anyone who willfully commits one of these acts is liable for *karet* – a spiritual penalty often described as the soul being “cut off.” While interpretations vary, the term carries a sense of deep severance, whether from the Jewish people or from a connection to God.

Yet Maimonides (Laws of Repentance 1:4) offers a hopeful path to forgiveness. Even the most serious sins can be atoned for through genuine remorse, repentance on Yom Kippur, and the experience of suffering. These three elements together can lead to complete spiritual rehabilitation.

However, Maimonides makes one notable exception: when a sin involves a public *desecration of God’s name (chilul Hashem)*, forgiveness is not fully granted until death completes the process. In these cases, even sincere repentance, Yom Kippur, and tribulations are not sufficient on their own.

Rabbi Ovadia Sforno explores a similar theme in this week’s Torah portion.

In Numbers 13–14, the spies return from scouting the Land of Canaan and deliver a discouraging report. Their words sow fear and despair among the people. As a result, God decrees that the entire generation will wander the desert for forty years and will never enter the Promised Land.

The following day, a group of Israelites expresses renewed faith and resolve. Despite Moses’ warnings, they attempt to go to battle, only to be defeated.

Sforno explains that these individuals were genuinely penitent. Internally, their transformation was real. But their earlier actions had publicly diminished God’s name. Because of this, even sincere repentance could not undo the full consequences. Their

sin had crossed a threshold that, according to Sforno, could only be fully atoned through their death.

This teaching highlights a sobering truth: personal sincerity does not always erase the public damage caused by certain acts. When God's name is publicly profaned, the consequences may run deeper.

Conversely, every act of loving and supporting Israel, or choosing to ascend to the land, can serve as a rectification of the sin of the spies. These actions affirm faith, hope, and connection to God's vision. They are not just spiritually meaningful; they are a public sanctification of God's name, a *kiddush Hashem*.

May we each find meaningful ways to elevate and honor God's name in the world, and may we recognize and embrace those opportunities when they arise.

Shabbat Shalom,

Ben-Tzion

Dedication

To the success of Operation Rising Lion and the speedy and complete destruction of all of our enemies.