



The Rabbi Who Refused to Recite the Vidui Parshas Shoftim

It was during the days before Rosh Hashanah, and the sleepy town of Brisk came to life. The community was faced with a terrible decree, one with which it had not faced in many years. The town's gentiles blamed a Jew for transgressing the state's laws, and he was sentenced to death.

The community turned to their leader, Rabbi Yitzchak Zeev Soloveitchik, who had just recently assumed the community's leadership. He was still very young and was already faced with many challenges. He called on the community to repent and pray, and especially on Rosh Hashanah eve, and maybe G-d would show mercy.

The next day, during the prayers and the Shofar blowing, government officials arrived at the synagogue and asked the rabbi to come with them, as it was the condemned man's last wish to meet with him and recite the Vidui, the confession recited before returning of one's soul to G-d. The Brisker Rabbi ignored them and commenced with his prayers. After waiting for an hour, the officials left. The rabbi, who had already concluded his prayers, returned to praying, as if he was unable to cease praying.

The communal leaders, fearing repercussions from the government, asked the rabbi to accompany the convict in his last moments, but he refused, telling them he was in the midst of praying.

Without asking the rabbi, the communal leaders sent an old Jew with a rabbinical look instead of the rabbi.

The old Jew recited the Vidui together with the convict, during Rosh Hashanah, during a day when the books of the living and the dead are open before G-d.

In our weekly parsha we read: " And you shall do according to the word they tell you, from the place the Lord will choose, and you shall observe to do according to all they instruct you. According to the law they instruct you and according to the judgment they say to you, you shall do; you shall not deviate from the word they tell you, either right or left."¹

Rashi explains that "even if this judge tells you that right is left, and that left is right. How much more so, if he tells you that right is right, and left is left."

The meaning of this is that even if a judge tells you something that seems to contradict common sense or reason, even so you are commanded to follow his words.

The Sefer Hachinuch² explains that this commandment is a foundation of the Torah, because if the Sages' words are not heeded, each person will go his own way and confrontation will erupt with abundance. Each person has a capability to interpret the Torah, and such a reality would create chaos. Therefore, we are all obligated to follow our Torah leadership.

The prophet Yechezkel says " Now you, son of man, I have made you a lookout for the house of Israel." The prophet and the Sage serve as lookouts. The Malbim explains that just as a town would set a lookout to warn of approaching dangers, so to the Sages warn of approaching spiritual dangers.

Rabbi Yechezkel Abramski added that if a lookout warns of an approaching danger, even if others claim they do not see it, all will listen to the lookout, as he stands high and can see things that those at a lower vantage point cannot see. Thus, if some stand to negate the words of a prophet or sage, their words are worthless, as the sage, from his high point, can see things others can't.

After Minchah on Rosh Hashanah began the rumor passed like a brushfire, first silently and then with an immense racket.

It turns out that the witnesses who testified against the convicted Jew were false, and it was a plot against the Jewish community of Brisk. Alas, the Jew was already executed a few hours ago.

Then the communal leaders understood why the Brisker rabbi refused to say the Vidui with the convict, as he saw with his pure eyes that the Jew would have ultimately been acquitted, and the communal leaders' shortness of sight brought about this death.

If only they would have listened to the rabbi and had waited until he concluded his praying, then the decree would have been annulled and the Jew would have been saved.

¹ Dvarim 17:11-12.

² Mitzvah 496.