

Sins of Weakness and Strength

BY RABBI DAVID WOLPE

In his jealous madness, King Saul has many Priests killed and is stripped of the kingship. King David commits adultery and though punished, retains the kingship. The spies who distrust God and bring bad reports of the land of Israel perish in a plague, but more dramatically and severely, Korach and his band are swallowed up by the earth. Why the difference?

Dietrich Bonhoeffer said that the difference between Saul and David's sin is one was a sin of strength, the other a sin of weakness. And God is less severe on sins of weakness. Being a bully or a tyrant is a sin of strength. The abuser in a relationship is guilty of a sin of strength. When the abused person could leave but does not, often teaching the children involved that abuse should be tolerated, it is a sin of weakness. No one would imagine the failures of weakness are as egregious as those of strength.

The Psalmist writes, "The LORD gives strength to his people; the LORD blesses his people with peace" (29:11). The first half reminds us that we must have strength to be moral. Weakness, too, can lead to sin. The ending reinforces that strength must be used for peace.