CHAPTER FOUR

by Rabbi Yitzchok Rubin

I used to get upset. I really did. There are these folk who walk around in every city clutching clipboards and stopping passersby to ask them all sorts of questions. They work for consumer groups that are trying to find out what customers really think. They're called "market researchers," and I'm sure you've come across them, too.

I used to get upset because they never stopped me. What was it about my face that told them I was unworthy of any cohesive opinions? What kind of democracy is it that doesn't allow me to express my brilliant insights? It really bothered me, until one day I met one of these opinion takers off duty.

"What is it with you guys?" I asked him. "I've passed many of your ilk, and not once have you stopped me to ask if I have a few minutes to share my genius with you."

"Well, Rabbi," he answered, "you just don't fit our model of an average consumer."

This sounded like blatant anti-Semitism to me.

"Rabbi, do you know what kinds of questions we ask?"

"How can I if I was never asked?" I replied.

"Basically we ask what beer you drink, how many pints a day, where you go Friday nights and other such lifestyle questions."

"Lifestyle questions? That sounds like a recipe for the ending of life, not a style to live one."

"That's the point, Rabbi. Your answers would throw off all our data." Since then, I stopped getting upset.

If you think about it honestly, though, the truth is that we all have some soul-searching to do in this area. In our heart of hearts, it is possible that we are enamored with all the wondrous sights culture has to offer us, and, though we may deny it, deep down many of us look on with a dull yet diligent ache of envy at the excesses of the crass world around us.

Some may be saying, "Who me? Never!" or "I'm a card-carrying member of the fruma brigade. I wear my tzitzis with pride." This may be true, but at the same time are we concerned with the brand name of the suit the tzitzis proudly adorn? Are we certain that in this freewheeling society we are not falling into the same rut as so many others and beginning to crave all that those opinion watchers are promoting?

Yes, there can be a glatt kosher brand of the American dream, but is it right?

The Chiddushei Harim (Rabbi Yitzchak Meir Rothenberg Alter, the first Gerrer Rebbe, 1799-1866) once observed, "A person is where his mind is." Although we may physically be in shul, if our emotional dialogue is with the latest glossy magazines, then that's where we really are. In Kotzk, a young student once came to the Rebbe to complain about alien thoughts that kept troubling him during his prayers. The Kotzker remarked, "But they aren't really alien. They're yours."

King David concerns himself with this in the fourth kapitel of Tehillim. When he composed this psalm, he was running away from his own son, Avshalom, who had spearheaded a revolt against him. This rebellion was supported by many of the population, including prominent citizens respected by their peers. It seems they were immersed in a fantasy that if David were removed from the picture, the Jewish people would be able to become more in tune with the heathen world around them and live a better life.

David calls out to them: *"Distinguished leaders! How long will you put my honor to shame, love vanity and seek deception?"*

David doesn't address the bnei adam, the ordinary citizens; rather, his words are directed to the bnei ish, the distinguished leaders. "You should know better," he tells them. "You have fallen for the empty value system of the trend-setters. You think the outside world holds secrets for a good life, but in the end, you will find out you were deceived. The empty fantasies you have allowed to capture your minds are what motivates this rebellion.

"Don't be fooled. *Hashem has singled me out for a special role as His devoted follower, and He will listen when I cry out to Him.* You are standing at the brink of sin. Don't fall into the trap!"

David then continues to admonish them: *Many people say, "Who will show us good?"* Rashi points out that this whole tragedy began because of the people's jealousy of the heathen nations, whom they perceived as living in greater comfort and enjoying life more. David tells his tormentors, *"Commune with your soul when you lie down to go to sleep, and say nothing."*

Many of our tzaddikim have coached us accordingly. When your heart is abuzz with the static of the materialism of life, step back! Create an oasis of quiet, even if only in your own bed. Be silent, stop the madness that screams in your soul, listen to that stillness and then pray, *Let the light of Your face shine on us, Hashem.*

In this psalm, David addresses the most frum Yidden, the cream of the crop whose ultimate downfall came because they hankered after the creature comforts of the heathens around them. They weren't advocating giving up any part of Judaism, G-d forbid. Instead, they aspired to a form of Yiddishkeit rooted in a value system based on materialism.

Let us think for a moment. Are our values safe? Yes, kollels swell in number, and new yeshivos are always opening. But with this must come a purging of the corruption that can destroy the fiber of our

people. If we fall for the glitter of the empty, driven lifestyles of the consumer world, then we are building on shifting sands. A kollel couple should not feel inferior because they can't afford luxuries that really have no place in a heimishe home to begin with.

Even the manner in which shidduchim are approached often takes on a whiff of a material binge. It becomes more and more difficult for struggling parents to make weddings because they can't even talk in terms of the thousands being demanded. This is no small matter, and it cries out for solutions.

David finishes the chapter with words that ring true down through the ages: *For You, Hashem, will make me dwell apart for my own security.* Our only hope of real security, a security that gives us true rest from the evil that seeks to poison us, is when we dwell apart. This doesn't mean living physically isolated from others, an unrealistic vision in the global village of today. Instead, we must teach our young (and ourselves) that the clipboard mentality is not ours. We have a higher calling, for we are today's distinguished leaders, the sons of great men Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov and should act accordingly.

The Torah warns us not to stray after our hearts and our eyes. Without even being aware of it, we are all prone to the egocentric error of not only accepting but also desiring the worldview that puts its faith in the perceptions and conclusions of mortal man. Only by fully attuning our hearts and thoughts to Hashem's word can we avoid disastrous perceptions. By following the Torah wholeheartedly, we will be able to say, as David did, that Hashem has *"eased the pressure"* the pressure that torments anyone who seeks the deceptively alluring materialism that surrounds us.

Text Copyright &copy 2007 by **Torah.org**.