

TOTAL CONTROL

by Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky

In this week's portion, the Torah tells us to decimate any remnant of idolatry: "You shall utterly destroy all the places where the nations that you are driving away worshiped their gods - on the high mountains and on the hills, and under every leafy tree. You shall break apart their altars, you shall smash their pillars, and their sacred trees shall you burn in the fire. Their carved images shall you cut down, and you shall obliterate their names from that place." (Deuteronomy 12:2-3)

But then, the Torah adds a verse that seems to be so unnecessary, if not wounding. The Torah tells us "You shall not do the same to Hashem, your G-d"(ibid. v.4)

The Talmud explains that from this verse we derive a prohibition against destroying synagogue property and erasing the name of Hashem. Rashi, however, quotes the Sifri, which offers an amazing interpretation: R Ishmael asks, "Can even a thought enter in your mind that the Jewish nation would break the altars of Hashem?"

Thus Rabbi Yishmael gives an homiletic interpretation of the verse. He says that the verse is not necessarily an admonition against physically breaking the walls of the Sanctuary, but rather it is a warning to the nation not to sin, thereby causing the Sanctuary of (built by) your fathers to be destroyed.

Rav Moshe Feinstein points out an amazing anomaly. Rabbi Yishmael is bothered at the simple connotation of the verse that he does not interpret it at face value. He can hardly fathom that there are Jews who need to be told not to break stones in the Altar, or the Temple. Therefore, he expounds that this refers to Jews who sin, and cause the destruction of the Temple. Yet when the Torah warns about idolatry, adultery, or murder, Rabbi Yishmael is mute. He does not ask, "Is it possible that a Jew would murder or commit idolatry? He is not shocked at the need to warn against adultery. He does not reinterpret those verses homiletically and explain them in a poetic fashion. He is quite content with the admonition in its purest and most simple form. Though he can accept Jews committing murder, but he cannot accept them smashing synagogues. What is the difference?

(Recently I heard this amazing story. However, I have changed the names of the parties involved and the location.)

Velvel was infamous in his native Tarnograd. A notorious gangster, he not only transgressed the mitzvos, but mocked those who observed them. He really did not have much to do with the members of the community, if not to lure someone into a promising business deal, only to rob him of

his ill-invested monies.

Velvel rarely visited the inside of the shul, save every few years on the yahrzeit of his pious father when the cobwebs of time were dusted off by the winds of guilt. Yes, Velvel was different than most of the villagers.

Except for early 1940, when he was no different than anyone else. The Nazis had overrun the town. They herded the community into the shul, and unfurled the Torah scrolls on the floor. Then they lined the people up and told them to march on the Torah, forcing them to spit on it as they past. And Velvel was right there amongst them. Velvel was a Jew and no different from anyone else.

Everyone lined up to obey and Velvel pushed to be first in line. And then he showed how special, how different he was. As he approached the Torah he stopped short, not even letting the tips of his soles touch the sacred parchment. Then he turned to the SS officer. "I don't tread on my Torah and I will never spit on it." They shot him on the spot, and like the rest of the villagers who followed suit, Velvel became a holy martyr.

Rav Feinstein explains that there are icons of Judaism that are virtually impregnable. And so, Rabbi Yishmael can understand that one can be completely detached from Judaism, to the extent that he disregards all the mitzvos, and transgresses the most awful of its prohibitions. However, that Jew, no matter how low he has sunk, will never destroy even one brick of a synagogue! That is why Rabbi Yishmael must explain the verse not through its simple meaning, but through a pastoral interpretation.

The love of Judaism transcends performance of any single command. And no Jew who heeds some Torah warning, needs admonition against destroying all that his soul embodies. In this era of shattered icons and crumbling values, it is important to build on the embers of Yiddishkeit that are still glowing in the heart of every Jew.

Dedicated by Gisele & Ira Beer in memory of Morris & Gisa Mayers

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