

# FOR YOURSELF

*by Rabbi Pinchas Avruch*

*"You shall not make idols for yourselves and you shall not erect for yourselves a statue or pillar and in your land you shall not emplace a flooring stone upon which to prostrate oneself - for I am G-d your Lord. My Sabbaths shall you observe and My Sanctuary shall you revere - I am G-d." (Vayikra/Leviticus 26:1-2)*

Rashi (1) elucidates that these verses are a conclusion of the final discourse of the previous chapter: a Jew who, because of his poverty, is sold to a resident heathen family. Noting the peculiar verbiage - commanding us not to make idols for ourselves - Rashi reveals the Torah's deeper message: do not say to yourself that because my master is licentious, I will emulate him; because my master serves idols, I will emulate him; because my master ignores the Sabbath, I will emulate him.

Rashi's concerns are perplexing. These sins are so severe, so contrary to the fundamentals of Jewish life. How could a slave be drawn to voluntarily violate these essential observances simply to imitate his master? Just because his master is evil, why must the slave aspire to such depravity? Further, why is Sabbath observance included in the list? Whatever the rationale of the Jewish servant to mimic the master's immoral acts, the gentile owner is not commanded to observe the Sabbath. With what mindset does he justify that emulation?

Chidushei HaLev (2) expounds that there is no logical motivation for a Jewish servant to pursue such repugnant acts simply because his master does, but there is a power deep in the heart that pushes him to act similarly. Rashi (3) codifies (Laws of Jewish Thought, ch. 6) that the nature of the human being is that he lets his philosophies and deeds follow the example of his neighbors and friends and he behaves like the populace of the province. Therefore, a person should befriend the righteous and accompany the wise to learn from their deeds and distance himself from the wicked, lest he learn from their deeds that will lead him into spiritual darkness. But, notes Rabbi Leibowitz, the impact of one's environment is not simply a de facto reception resulting from extended exposure. Rather, Rashi's explanation of the verse indicates that there is an internal motivation to emulate their corruption. Even though he may rationally, intellectually appreciate the error of his ways, he must battle a strong emotional urge compelling him to imitate.

Our forefather Avraham was called an "ivri" because he came from the other side ("aiver") of the Euphrates River. But our Sages expound that spiritually he was on the other side of a great

philosophical chasm. His grandchildren - our grandparents - the Children of Israel, accepted the Torah at Sinai 3316 years ago, an event we plan to relive in two weeks with the holiday of Shavuot. That transformative event was not simply the acceptance of a legal system, like the ratification of the United States Constitution 215 years ago. Rather, it was the acceptance of a Divine charge to follow Avraham's example for eternity, to pursue a life of G-d consciousness and Divine emulation, demonstrating to the rest of humanity the emptiness of a life of material pursuits and temporal pleasures. But true growth only comes with genuine challenge. We were given the Torah as life's instruction manual, but the choice to follow it is ours to make for ourselves.

Have a Good Shabbos!

*(1) Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki; 1040-1105; commentator par excellence, whose commentary is considered basic to the understanding of the text*

(2) the ethical discourses of Rabbi Alter Henach Leibowitz, Rosh Yeshiva/Dean of Yeshiva Chofetz Chaim of Kew Gardens Hills, New York

(3) acronym for Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon, Maimonides; 1135-1204; one of the primary Torah scholars of Middle Ages, author of Commentary to the Mishna, Mishna Torah (the first comprehensive Code of Jewish Law) and Moreh Nevuchim (Guide to the Perplexed)

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