

FOLLOW YOUR CONSCIENCE, NOT YOUR HEART

by Rabbi Yaakov Menken

"Lest there be among you a man or woman, family or tribe, whose heart turns away from HaShem your G-d today, to follow and serve the gods of these nations; lest there be among you a root that sprouts poison and gall. And it will be, when he hears the words of this curse, that he will bless himself in his heart, saying, 'I will have peace, for I am ruled by my own heart,' in order to satisfy his thirsts. HaShem will not consent to forgive him, for the anger of HaShem and His jealousy will smoke against that man, and every curse written in this book will lie upon him, and HaShem will blot out his name from under Heaven." [29:17-19]

Usually, the "Lifeline" has a nice, feel-good message. But sometimes, especially before Rosh Hashanah, it's appropriate not to feel too good about ourselves.

My teacher Rabbi Asher Rubenstein called this passage "The most frightening in the entire Torah." What angers the Holy One, Blessed be He, more than anything? "When he hears the words of this curse, that he will bless himself in his heart, saying, 'I will have peace, for I am ruled by my own heart!'" Complacency. Claiming to be just fine, ruled by our own hearts. Having an attitude that permits us to follow our hearts' desires. "HaShem will not consent to forgive him..."

What sin did the person commit? None! He merely decided in his heart to follow his own desires, and ignore his obligations. Instead of engaging in self-criticism and attempting to improve his actions, he decided to do whatever he wanted to do. And that is so contrary to what HaShem desires from us, that this alone causes, as it were, an implacable anger.

We live in a society that is all in favor of "following your heart," rather than "following your conscience." "Seize the moment!" "Live for now!" - and, "Look out for Number One!"

No one should say, "I'm a good Jew," or even, "I'm a good person" - unless always followed by, "but I could be better." Let us recognize our errors, and the vast room for improvement in our behavior. And let us make "New Year's Resolutions" that we intend to keep beyond the Fast of Gedaliah [the third of Tishrei, the third day of the new year.]

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