

DEADLY COMPROMISES

by Rabbi Yaakov Menken

"Moshe stood in the gate of the camp, and he said, 'whomever is for G-d, let him come to me,' and all the children [tribe] of Levi gathered around him." [32:26]

There is a Medrash that asks an obvious question: who wouldn't want to be for HaShem? "Who doesn't want to be a member of the king's household?" But Moshe only allowed those who had not given their gold to create the Golden Calf to gather around him. "Whomever is for G-d," meaning **only** for G-d without including idol-worship as well.

The Chofetz Chaim says that we can take a truly profound lesson from this. Sometimes we need to realize that compromise is crucial for harmony at home, makes peace, and is good for political life - but deadly where matters of principle are concerned. One cannot "compromise" with idolatry and evil.

It is almost guaranteed - whenever a person decides to take a step forward towards G-d and moral conduct, the next day someone or something will require a little "flexibility." This is a test of your "emergency response system:" do you have principles, or guidelines subject to change without notice? Do you follow Ten Commandments, or look up to Ten Nice Ideas?

The Chofetz Chaim goes on to explain that Eliyahu issued this challenge in Kings I 18:21 [idiomatic translation]: "until when will you continue to straddle both sides of the fence?" Eliyahu told the people to make the decision: whose side are you on? Do you worship G-d, or the idol Ba'al?

Eliyahu continues, "if HaShem is G-d, then go after him, and if the Ba'al, then follow him." He seems to say that fence-straddling is worse than pure idolatry - and the Chofetz Chaim concludes that this is very much the case. The fence-straddlers send the message that it is OK to sometimes go to the Ba'al, whereas if they would always go to the Ba'al, then everyone would know that they were idol-worshippers rather than followers of the G-d of Israel, and people would withdraw themselves from them.

At times, we must make a choice, and this goes well beyond whether we can "import" Buddhist meditation into Judaism. If we have principles, and then demonstrate "flexibility" where they are concerned, we send a message that we lack sincerity in our overall convictions. Even becoming

angry or defensive shows that one is considering the alternative. A calm denial is not "intransigence," but a demonstration that principles are not for sale.