

WIVES - BAD INFLUENCES?

by Rabbi Yaakov Menken

"And he should not acquire too many wives, that his heart not go astray, and he should not acquire great sums of silver and gold." [17:17]

The Torah tells us that a king may be tempted to acquire a large number of wives -- a harem, as it were. This can arise from base motivations, as we see in our own time. But Shlomo HaMelech, King Solomon, married a large number of wives for a commendable reason. He felt that by creating bonds of marriage with surrounding kingdoms, he would insure peace and prosperity for Israel. But in either case, the Torah tells us that having too many wives will distract the king from his responsibilities to G-d, and this is surely true if any of the wives is herself a bad influence. King Solomon's wives from the surrounding kingdoms came from idolatrous homes.

Our Sages say that Shlomo HaMelech was caught by his own wisdom. He believed that he would be able to avoid the problems described in this verse. He felt that because he knew the underlying reason behind the mitzvah, he could achieve the same goal without following the mitzvah itself. Yet there is no substitute for observing G-d's word. As we see in Kings I 11:5, the Prophet is very critical and implies that Solomon served idols in his later years. In the Talmud, our Sages explain that since the previous verse merely says that his service of G-d was not as complete as his father David's, it cannot be true that he actually served idols. Rather, he is blamed for failing to prevent his wives from doing so.

This is commonly explained as follows: by converting these women and then marrying them, Solomon became responsible for their actions, and his level of responsibility was only magnified by his own piety and closeness to G-d. Thus when his wives returned to their idol-worship, he was blamed by the prophet as if he himself had participated.

Rabbi Shamshon Raphael Hirsch leads us to a still deeper insight. The verse in the Torah, he notes, does not say "that they will not lead his heart astray," but rather "that his heart not go astray." They need not be directly involved in distracting the king from his Divine Service. Rather, the very presence of too many bad influences is itself a distraction.

Perhaps we can connect this explanation with the error of Shlomo HaMelech. King Solomon believed that he could avoid their bad influence. He knew that they would not be able to lead his own heart astray, and therefore thought that he was safe. However, the verse itself explains that their presence alone is a problem -- and this, we see, Shlomo HaMelech could not control. He could

not prevent them from serving idols, and thus from _existing_ as a bad influence. Their conscious impact, he could avoid; the sin was in their mere presence, distracting from the Service of G-d.

Today we live in environment where a host of influences work to drag us away from higher thoughts and closeness to G-d. It is not enough to shelter oneself from the conscious influences, to be wary of only their impact upon oneself. Rather, their very presence is a problem, when we are responsible for them. Let us try to keep those bad influences out of our homes, and away from our children. If neighborhoods around schools can be posted as "drug-free zones" (as if this meant drugs were acceptable in other areas), then no matter what influences we find in the streets, let us at least keep them away from our homes and our own areas of responsibility!

Good Shabbos!

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