

THE STREET

by Rabbi Yaakov Menken

"After HaShem your G-d you will go, Him you shall fear, His Commandments you will guard, to His voice you will listen, Him you will serve, and to Him you will cleave." [13:5]

In this week's reading, we find three separate sections which discuss various influences which prevail upon a person to abandon G-d and His Mitzvos in order to serve a false god. And as we learn from the verse quoted above, to follow G-d means to cleave to Him and listen to His voice. Any ideology which draws us away from Judaism and the performance of distinctly Jewish Mitzvos -- however positive it might seem -- has all of the same impact as bowing to a clay idol.

The Avnei Ezel explains that we learn about "real-world" influences from these three sections, and thus we learn to be on guard against each one.

The first section discusses the "false prophet," who produces signs or wonders that actually come about as predicted. In our own era, says the Avnei Ezel, this corresponds to a convincing, charismatic leader. A guru comes to town, sets up shop, and proceeds to convince you how your life will be filled with meaning and happiness if you will only give yourself and all of your money to his church. It sounds ridiculous, but as we all know cults have proven extremely successful at doing exactly this -- and, of course, that young Jews without a solid Jewish education have proven especially susceptible to their influences, promises and sheer charisma.

The second reading discusses persuasion by "friends and family." Again it is trivial to find a modern expression of the Torah's warning: peer pressure. Today, we are less susceptible to the influences of our parents and close relatives (the loss of respect for authority and love of family being another topic), but the same cannot be said for our closest friends. If a few of our friends end up in Scientology, G-d forbid, then we're likely to find ourselves with free gifts -- like books with L. Ron Hubbard's name on the cover. Again the Torah warns us with clarity of vision and perception of human nature: be on guard! The same person who proves resistant to the charismatic leader may be all too dependent upon his or her closest friends and relations, and may find it extremely difficult to resist their entreaties.

And the third and final influence discussed by the Torah is the idolatrous city -- otherwise known as "the street." You go outside, and this is what "normal" people are doing. This is what newspapers, radio and television, public officials and general public behavior indicate is normative and appropriate. You don't do this? You don't believe this? Then you are discriminatory, you are divisive,

you are a "throwback to the Middle Ages."

While the behavior of some of our contemporaries may be a throwback to Sodom and Gemorrah, leaving the "Middle Ages" two millennia more advanced, that's not an issue. In recent news, the New Jersey Supreme Court redefined the Boy Scouts of America, a private membership organization, as a "public accommodation," no different than a theater or restaurant, simply because it is large. Even more, the Court claimed that it knew better than the Boy Scouts themselves how to interpret the Boy Scout Oath! The end result? According to the Court, a large membership organization cannot set a moral or faith Code for its members, unless it is clearly defined as a religious organization per se. Yes, of course I'm opinionated about this and very non-PC, but I don't think you need to agree with me about the particular issue in order to acknowledge that the government shouldn't be forcing upon us its own definition of appropriate friends and associates.

In other news, an Air Force Officer was recently demoted for refusing to serve a 24 hour shift in isolation, manning a missile silo together with a female soldier. The officer is a devout Catholic, and his interpretation of his religious beliefs (quite similar, in fact, to the laws of "yichud" in Judaism) prevented him from being alone with a woman for an extended period for fear of what might transpire. For this belief, for his desire to avoid the sort of circumstances which invite misbehavior, he was punished.

I don't think we need to make a value judgment in order to recognize an infringement upon the right of individuals to free association and their religious principles, allegedly protected by the Constitution. This is the pressure of the street that the Torah is talking about. This is what bears down upon any person who attempts to follow the path and precepts of the Torah instead of the whims of modern society.

This is why the Torah reminds us who we are, and what we must do. "After HaShem your G-d you will go, Him you shall fear, His Commandments you will guard, to His voice you will listen, Him you will serve, and to Him you will cleave."

*Dedicated l'zecher ul'ilui nishmas (in memory of, and for the benefit of the soul of) Mr. Ian Ostroff --
Yehudah Yitzchock Aharon ben Simcha*