

THE COUNSEL OF MY HEART

by Torah.org

Our reading this week contains an extraordinary passage, one which is very relevant for the upcoming High Holy Days. Moshe gathers the Nation of Israel together, and describes to them a truly unforgivable sin. It is so terrible that "Hashem will not be willing to forgive him, but Hashem's anger and jealousy will be kindled against him..." [29:19]

What is this great crime? What could a person do that is so terrible and degraded that it is *certain* to arouse Divine anger, rather than forgiveness?

The answer describes something so simple that, at first glance, we may not understand why it is so wrong. G-d, through Moshe, makes a covenant with the Jews that they will not follow idols or the immoral practices of idolaters, a covenant that we are sworn to follow. But then the Torah describes an individual, family or tribe that is drawn to idolatry. "And when he hears the words of this curse, he will bless himself in his heart, saying, 'I will have peace, as I follow the counsel of my own heart,' adding 'the watered upon the dry.'" [29:18]

What is it that arouses Divine anger? Simply that he lies back, instead of trying to improve. "I will have peace — I can continue misbehaving, and nothing bad will happen."

As I said, we may not understand why that's so horrible. Isn't the actual sin what matters? Why is a person's "lackadaisical attitude" more worthy of Divine wrath than serving idols?

To be drawn to idolatry, or any form of misbehavior, is to be overwhelmed by a desire. We are human. We want things that we're not supposed to have, whether power, tempting foods, someone else's money or a forbidden relationship. And, sadly, we sometimes give in to those temptations. G-d knows we are human, and can forgive us if we turn back, express sincere regret, and commit to doing better.

Not so the person who says, "I will have peace." I remember my teacher, Rabbi Asher Rubenstein zt"l, speaking about how dangerous and wrong this is. Self-satisfaction with our own shortcomings? That's what infuriates Hashem.

Rashi explains what the verse means by "adding the watered upon the dry." When a person is indifferent to his own wrongdoing, there is no longer any distinction between inadvertent error and deliberate sin. Once he is willing to callously do the sin deliberately, the fact that today he did it by mistake no longer makes his behavior easier to forgive.

This thought applies to every person, no matter his or her spiritual level. We cannot be satisfied with where we are; we must look at our actions, and try to do better.

And that, of course, is one of the key messages of Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur. We must grab the special opportunity of these Holy Days to turn away from our mistakes and our bad choices, and set ourselves upon a better path. Let us show HaShem that we are not indifferent to our wrong actions, but sincerely desire greater closeness to the Divine.

May we all be Written and Sealed for a Blessed Year!

Yaakov Menken