

HORNS AND HEDONISM

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

The Midrash (Bereishis Rabbah 2:4) says that one of the methods the Greeks used to discourage Jews from their beliefs was "to have them write upon the horns of an ox that they have no portion in the G-d of Israel." While there is no problem understanding their motivation in having us renounce our G-d and our religion, having us write it upon the horns of an ox seems, if nothing else, quaint. Wouldn't it have been more effective to have us tattoo some atheistic message onto our arms or chests; or perhaps have the words embroidered upon our garments? Hitler, yimach sh-emo (may his name be blotted out), whose intention was in fact the opposite of the Greeks (to constantly remind us we're Jews), certainly knew that tattoos and decals were most potent reminders of a message one doesn't want forgotten. So what is the symbolism of inscribing words upon the horns of an ox?

R' Yaakov Yisrael of Tsherkas zt"l (quoted by his son, R' Mordechai of Hornesteipel zt"l in Pele Yo'etz) explains that the ox symbolizes desire and physical hedonism (think roast beef; steak; filet mignon...). Greek society was one that worshipped the human body. They knew well that the key to a man's heart, so to speak, was through his stomach. To attack the religion and beliefs of the Jewish nation head-on was a losing proposition; their faith was too deep and their beliefs too ingrained for the Greeks to hope that with a few feeble arguments they might stand a chance of swaying a nation from a theology and a G-d they had served and died-for for centuries. Instead, he explains, they took the indirect path. By attempting to include (and in many cases succeeding!) our nation in their hedonistic culture, complete abandonment of religion, or at least its marginalization, was just around the corner. One who worships his body, his theatre, his high-society culture, or his country-club membership, would ultimately retain little interest in worshipping his G-d as well. Sure, there might still be the perfunctory visit to the synagogue now and then, but when man worships himself, G-d, for the most part, takes a back seat.

One of the great ba'lei mussar (a movement which concentrated upon the teaching of ethics and morals) once explained that he never understood the above Midrash until once, while on vacation, he visited a museum. In the museum, he explained, there was an exhibit on the development of infant-feeding. Throughout the ages different methods were used to get newborn children to eat and drink when they weren't nursing, and these were all displayed, right up to what we recognize as the present-day bottle, complete with disposable plastic baggies. What fascinated him, however, was that before the development of synthetics, the horn of an animal such as an ox or ram was often used to feed infantile children; the narrow end was placed in their mouths, while through the wider end, liquids or soft foods such as mashed vegetables were gently poured.

"It was then," he said, "that the meaning of the Midrash came to me. The Greeks realized that to dissuade the Jews of their religion was an impossibility. If nothing else, we are a stubborn and stiff-necked nation, and are not easily swayed from what we believe. Thus the Greeks concentrated their efforts on the small children, who were the future of Israel. Write upon the horns of the ox, from which the infants receive their first nourishment, that they have no portion in the G-d of Israel."

Of course tiny infants don't usually read the inscriptions on the containers they're fed with (don't tell that to cereal-box manufacturers), but symbolically, what the Midrash is trying to tell us is that the Greeks understood that their only chance of uprooting a stubborn nation from its beliefs was to work their magic on the small, impressionable youth. Thus, they forbade the teaching of Torah, and did not allow bris milah to be performed. A nation whose youth is divorced from the ways and teachings of its elders and ancestors, they knew, could not withstand the test of time.

It seems to me that, perhaps unknowingly, Western culture has succeeded in cultivating and combining the best of both methods into one deadly brew. The key to our destruction (G-d forbid), the Greeks knew, is to attack our youth. They also knew that the most effective assault on religion is not the outright challenge, but rather the subtle wooing of the Jewish soul from its roots by giving it something more immediately satisfying and pleasurable; worship of the self.

R' Moshe Feinstein zt"l writes (Igros Moshe, Yoreh Deah-3 71), "Behold, in our country (U.S.A), due to the abundance of (material) blessings and wealth that Hashem has given us, there is a tremendous desire and need to constantly satisfy oneself with all sort of physical, this-worldly pleasures - that which people call 'having a good time' (he actually writes those exact words, transliterated into Hebrew) - which ultimately destroy one's character and accustom man to constantly seek pleasure from unnecessary and superfluous distractions." We see, he writes, from the halacha of Ben Sorer U-Moreh - the Wayward Son - that a child is punished simply for overindulging himself in meat and drink. While the Wayward Son, at the point the Torah picks up the narrative (see Devarim/Deuteronomy ch. 21), has in fact done little in the way of serious immorality, the Torah "delves to the depths of his nature (Rashi ibid.; Talmud, Sanhedrin 72a)," and realizes that ultimately, the son who in his youth gorges himself on meat and drink, will one day abandon the Torah completely.

In many discussions I've had recently with Yeshiva Rebeim, one topic keeps coming up again and again: Today's youth, they say, just don't have the patience and zitzfleish that previous generations had for studying Mishna and Gemara. They barely have the patience to just sit and listen. While many might attribute this sudden drop in attention-span to a general yeridas ha-doros - the process of each generation being somewhat less diligent than its predecessors - I believe there is more to it than that.

Think about it: What captures a child's imagination quicker - a Game-Boy, or a Gemara? A movie, or a Mishna? A trip, or a tefilah? By obsessing over constantly giving children a "good time," and addicting

them to the high-speed pleasures and entertainment in which North American culture prides itself, today's parents are actually making it harder and harder for our youth to absorb the deep, soul-touching messages Judaism has to offer.

Stop for a moment to think about the differences between our youth and the culture in which today's children are raised. Were the things that gave you pleasure simpler and more mundane? How often did you eat candies, drink soda, or get potato-chips for snacks? I know that what was for me a "treat" when I was a child is for today's children ho-hum at best. Manufacturers of nosh have upped the ante from what passed for a treat when we were kids. Look at the names of some of the latest ice-cream bars: Do you think a "Knackadik" gets your kid's taste-buds watering? Would a graphically-enhanced, computer CD-rom game capture their attention more than a Rashi or a pasuk Chumash?

People wonder why it is today's Yeshivos and schools have to run so many incentive programs - with such elaborate prizes - just to get kids to do the things they should be doing; learning and reviewing. It's not rocket science; economists call it (I think) maximum efficiency. A person will ultimately be drawn to what he perceives as giving him the "biggest bang for the buck" - so if you want me to learn, you'd better make it worth my while; otherwise, there are more enjoyable (and brainless) ways for me to spend my time.

While learning a blatt Gemara can be a most enjoyable experience, it is an "acquired taste," one that comes with age and experience. One fears, however, that by the time some of today's youth reach the age that they should be acquiring that taste, their impressionable young taste-buds have already been dulled and stupefied by the pseudo-sensuous Western culture of computer-games, nosh, and media-bombardment.

It comes as no surprise that the Torah often refers to the Messianic age as a time when "our horns will be uplifted (see, for instance, Tehilim/Psalms 89:18)." While we can not realistically hope to stem the tide of high-octane materialism that pervades Western society, perhaps an awareness of how it affects us, and most importantly our youth, can help us to acquire a sensitivity to the issues of cultivating Torah in a generation whose imagination is threatening to be captured by more seductive, if ultimately hollow, pleasures.

Have a good Shabbos and a freilichen Chanukah.

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