

THE MORALITY OF INTOLERANCE

by Rabbi Aron Tendler

We live at a time when intolerance of any sort is deemed politically incorrect, and therefore wrong, even evil. Must all intolerance be wrong? Must we always be politically correct?

In last week's Parsha and this week's Parsha we find examples of what appears to be gross intolerance on the part of Moshe's instructions to the Jews. In Parshas Re'eh it states, (12:1-4) "These are the decrees and ordinances...all the days that you will live on the Land. You shall utterly destroy all the places where the nations that you are driving away worshiped their gods... You shall break apart their altars... their sacred trees shall you burn in the fire... and you shall obliterate their names from that place."

In this week's Parsha Moshe commanded, (16:21) "Do not plant an idolatrous tree near the Mizbeach (altar)... nor erect a pillar which G-d hates." The Ramban (Nachmanadies) explains that the prohibition against planting trees near the Mizbeach extends to the kind of landscaping that idolatrous churches used to make their worship more attractive and inviting to parishioners.

Regardless of a churches beauty we are forbidden to incorporate its design into the decoration of the Bais Hamikdash or Shul. Regardless of the power of a monument proclaiming G-d's singular sovereignty, Moshe told us that G-d hates "pillars," because they were standard expressions of idolatry.

I vividly recall one of my Father's congregants, a world respected art expert and restorer, who turned down a very lucrative contract to restore a church somewhere in Europe. My father Shlita pointed out that even more impressive than the congregant's acceptance of the demanded sacrifice was the manner in which he accepted the Halachik ruling. It was done without fanfare or apparent regrets.

I have little doubt that many reading this account would wonder why Halacha is so intolerant. Why can't we appreciate other forms of worship and beliefs? Are we so insecure with our own beliefs that we cannot tolerate any exposure to other cultures and religions?

The beginning of Parshas Shoftim cautions us against any form of bias or bribery within the judicious system. (16:19) "...And they should judge the nation righteously. Do not pervert judgment... do not accept a bribe, for it will blind the eyes of the wise... and the righteous." It is clear from the verses that

Moshe was addressing the wise and the righteous, not the crooked and the evil. Yet, Moshe felt that he had to caution the very best of the best, those individuals who would ascend to positions of leaders and judges to avoid bribery and influence. Obviously the Torah did not trust us to do the right and the just on our own. The Torah assumed that without extra warnings and vigilance on our part even the best among us would be influenced to be unjust!

In answer to my previous question we see that G-d felt that we could not tolerate exposure to other cultures and religions without being influenced. We are no different than the righteous leader and judge who cannot withstand the insidious influences of bribery.

When strangers first meet there is a natural and proper tendency to test the waters before venturing too far into a new relationship. They are respectful of each other's opinions and feelings and hide the extent of their deeper thoughts and emotions. As they begin to trust each other and the basic respect that they have for each other, the once strangers now friends let down their guard and reveal their truer selves. It is at this latter stage in the relationship that real influence and change can happen. It was this latter stage that concerned G-d and Moshe.

As G-d's chosen teachers, the Jews must engage the other nations and religions in discussion and debate. The early engagements will have to be politically correct and defensively respectful. They will provide the basis for a deeper and more involved relationship between the Jews and the other nations. However, effecting true change and influence requires vulnerability and honest challenge, and at that stage the influence can go both ways, from Jew to non-Jew and from non-Jew to Jew.

The only time the Jews are able to engage in challenging and debating the outside world is if their personal beliefs and practices are beyond change and influence. They must believe in the validity of G-d's Torah as the absolute measure of truth and decency. They must fully trust G d and the teachings of His servant Moshe, and both family and nation must be single minded in their support of this absolute conviction. Of course all conversations and engagements between the Jews and the other nations must be conducted with sensitivity, respect, and dignity. However, at the same time truth cannot be sacrificed on the altar of political correctness.

The Torah's seeming intolerance of foreign influences and cultures defines the nature of our homes and country. It provides absolute criteria for evaluating truth and justice.

In his essay "The Sins of The Early-Ones" Rabbi Dessler (Michtav Ma'Eliyahu) writes that we need to explain the various accounts of sinning recorded in the Torah. Each recorded "sin" and its condemnation must be evaluated in relation to the individual's potential and G-d's expectation for that person. The figures in question such as Reuven, Moshe, King David, and the generation of the Exodus, were chastised in extreme terms because they had great potential and G-d's expectation for them was very high. However, the scales of justice used to judge their actions and the words used to describe their sins would not be the same scales or words used to judge and describe our actions.

Rabbi Dessler illustrated his point with the story of Achan. In preparation for their first battle to occupy the Promised Land G-d forbade the Jews from benefiting from the anticipated wealth of Yericho (Jericho). Acting on his own, Achan transgressed G-d's explicit instruction and took from the "Cherem (forbidden booty)." As punishment for his sin the Jews lost their next battle against the city of Eye. G-d explained to Yehoshua that the Jews had lost because, "They took from the Cherem and transgressed the law of G-d!" It seems a bit unfair that the entire nation was condemned and punished because one lone person transgressed the law. In fact, one might think that there was more cause for celebration than condemnation! Imagine, only one person out of 3,000,000 did not listen to G-d! That means that all the others did listen! Would you say the glass was half full or half empty?

Rabbi Dessler explained that G-d judged, condemned, and punished the nation using a scale of justice calibrated to that generation's potential. Although only Achan transgressed G-d's law the entire nation shared the blame. The justification for doing so (while not exempting Achan of blame) was due to the power and influence that the environment of the nation should have had upon Achan. Had the entire nation behaved in a way that expressed total abhorrence to transgressing G-d's law Achan would not have taken from the forbidden wealth of Yericho. For some reason the nation as a whole was not 100% committed to G-d's definition of right and wrong, good and evil; therefore, the entire nation was punished because of an individual's transgression. Therefore, whenever the Torah strongly condemns the actions of a person or a society we must first know G-d's level of expectation for the players in order to understand the description of their sin.

One of Moshe's major concerns for the future of the nation was the effect their interaction with the other nations would have on them. On the one hand it was their responsibility as G-d's Chosen to interact with the other nations. On the other hand they could easily be influenced by foreign beliefs and practices. Therefore, G-d commanded that when it comes to a person's own home and country he has every right to be intolerant and politically incorrect.

Owning firearms continues to be a hotly debated issue. Imagine if a neighbor or family member insisted on installing a gun cabinet filled with weapons in your home!

Smoking cigarettes continues to be a hotly debated issue. Imagine if a friend or family member insisted on smoking in your home!

Legalizing marijuana and drugs is still a hotly debated issue. Imagine if a friend or relative insisted on smoking pot or using drugs in your home in the presence of your children!

Age appropriate movies and television are a constant and growing concern. Imagine if a friend or relative insisted on watching a show that you considered inappropriate or having questionable values in sight of your children!

I have no doubt that you would be deeply offended if not outraged at your neighbor or relative. How dare he pollute the environment of your home with his bad habits or perversions! The home you and

your spouse have labored to create reflects the truths and values you have the right and obligation to impart to your children! Would you allow that individual to compromise the sanctity of your home? Should you be "politically correct" and allow for pluralism, open-mindedness, and individual expression at the expense of your integrity? It's one thing to argue intolerance when it is not your home; however, in your own home who could argue that you do not have the right to maintain it's purity and sanctity?!

"Destroy their monuments, their idolatrous trees, and their places of worship." The Torah never asked us to do so outside the borders of Israel or our own homes; however, within the land of Israel the subtlety of a foreign influence must be accepted as fact regardless of personal preference or tolerance.

There is no stronger influence than home and environment. So long as the Jewish home and country has clear and unambiguous criteria for evaluating right and wrong the Jew can venture out into the world of foreign influences and options. However, if the Jewish home and Land is confused by popular culture, political correctness, and alternative values, the outside world will pervert the ways of even the wise and the righteous.

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