

THE TORAH'S SAFEGUARDS

by Rabbi Berel Wein

The words of the rabbis that "One who sees the shame of the woman who was unfaithful should thereupon abstain from consuming wine" are well known and oft-repeated. The obvious meaning of this message is that in life everyone must drive defensively. Let no one allow one's self to be found in compromising circumstances and to think that somehow one is immune from its consequences.

In our current world there are numerous shameful and sad examples of people in high office and great achievement who have been brought to shame and grief by the revelations of their indiscretions. The rabbis in Avot stated that there always is "an eye that sees us" - a constantly recording surveillance camera, if you will, that captures our movements and behavior.

The public revelation of another's sin should serve as a reminder to all of the consequences of that sin. The Torah that ordinarily is very protective of one's right to privacy, even the rights of a sinner, chose to publicize the fate of the unfaithful woman in order to impress upon others the necessity of care and probity in all matters of life.

One should never say that this can never happen to me. When it comes to the areas of human appetites and desires there are no automatic safeguards. Rather, only care, vigilance and avoidance of risk and compromising situations are the unique tools of prevention readily available. Hence the clear connection that the rabbis make between witnessing sin and imbibing too much wine. Just as driving an automobile under the influence of alcohol and drugs is legally forbidden, so is life generally to be lived free those types of influences.

Addiction to alcohol was a rather rare occurrence in Jewish society over the ages. However acculturation and assimilation over the past century have made alcohol a problem in our current Jewish world. The idea of abstinence from wine as described in the parsha regarding the regimen of the nazir is meant to be taken generally as a message of moderation and good sense.

Like many other things in life, a little alcohol can be pleasurable and beneficial but a lot can be harmful and even lethal. The Torah holds up the faithless woman and the nazir as examples of the dangers that lie lurking in everyday life. It is essentially foolish for any human being to ignore these omnipresent temptations and dangers.

Again, we read in Avot that one should not trust one's self even until the final moment of life. An abundance of over-confidence in one's ability to withstand temptations of all sorts will always lead to unforeseen problems and sad consequences. All of human experience testifies to this conclusion.

Much of the modern world, including much of the current Jewish world as well, mocks and derides any type of defensive driving in personal life matters. The concept of personal freedom has morphed into a lifestyle where any restraints on personal behavior, reasonable as they may be, are attacked and derided. Well, fashions and mores may change with the times but human behavior does not and therefore the moral restraints the Torah imposes on us remain eternally valid and cogent.

Shabat shalom,
Rabbi Berel Wein

Rabbi Berel Wein- Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at www.rabbiwein.com