

PARASHAS NITZAVIM

Of Blandishments and Seductions

There would be no tomorrow for Moses. He knows this is the last day of his life, and as he stands before the people, he strives to leave them with a message that would carry them forward to success in the Promised Land. What concerns occupy his mind at this auspicious moment?

He is concerned about the influence of the idolatrous peoples among whom the Jewish people find themselves. "You have seen their abominations," he declares, "their idols forged from wood and stone, from silver and gold." Should anyone embrace these gods, Hashem will respond with fuming anger and the most horrific curses.

Why was Moses so concerned about this? For forty years, he had conditioned the people against idolatry, teaching them the numerous commandments in the Torah which prohibit anything remotely resembling idolatrous practices. Surely, a deep antipathy to idolatry had become ingrained in the national psyche, a strong aversion to the pagan abominations and their degenerate lifestyles. Why was he afraid that they would backslide into idolatry - as indeed they did?

Before we explore this intriguing question, let us focus for a moment on Moses' somewhat curious choice of words. Why does he find it necessary to specify that the abominations are made of "wood and stone, silver and gold"? Why dwell on the range of materials from which idols are made?

Here in this very phrase, explain the commentators, lies the crux of the matter. Moses knew without question that the Jewish people emerging from a forty-year-long divine encounter in the desert, from the daily miracles of the manna and the cloud and fire pillars, from intensive study of the Torah under the tutelage of the greatest prophet of all time, were on a very high spiritual level. Without question, they would find the idols thoroughly abominable, vulgar contrivances of wood and stone.

But human nature is a fickle thing. As time goes on, people have a tendency to come to terms with their surroundings, to legitimize the illegitimate. Before long, Moses feared, those execrable idols of wood and stone might begin to take on a different aspect in their perception, undergoing a transformation to silver and gold. This was where the danger lurked.

In this light, we can understand a rather puzzling comment in the Talmud. In the Torah, the laws of the Nazirite vows and the laws of the

suspected adulteress appear next to each other. What is the significance of this juxtaposition? The Talmud explains that when a person witnesses the public degradation of the adulteress, he should take the Nazirite vow of abstinence from wine in order to protect himself from promiscuity.

But why would the sight of an adulteress in disgrace threaten a man's virtue? Shouldn't it have quite the opposite effect? Here again we come face to face with the vagaries of human nature. Although his first reaction might have been profound disapproval, the image of the adulteress may linger on in his mind and becomes legitimized and sanitized with time. Therefore, he should turn to the Nazirite vows for protection.

An old man developed a propensity for alcohol in his old age. During his binges, he would stagger drunkenly through the marketplace and often fall asleep in the gutter. His son, a respected member of the community, was mortified. Something had to be done.

The son decided to take his father to the marketplace on one of his sober days. Together, they walked past the stalls until they found a drunk lying in the gutter in a state of stupefaction.

"Look at him," said the son. "Do you see what drinking does?"

The old man stared intently at the snoring drunk.

"Indeed, I do," he said. "I wonder what kind of wine he is drinking. It seems to be wonderful stuff."

In our own lives, we need to recognize the seductive power of forbidden fruit. "Never trust yourself," the Talmud advises. Just because we frown on the deprivations and abominations of modern society does not mean that we are impervious to moral subversion. What seems disgusting to us today may seem interesting tomorrow. Only by insulating our families from unnecessary exposure to the degeneracy of the street can we preserve the purity and holiness that are inherently ours.