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RESISTING THE PRESSURE

LIFE IS ABOUT KEEPING OUR SENSE OF DIRECTION DESPITE ALL THE MANY pressures. We are pulled this way and that, sometimes into negative situations. The teachings of the Torah give us guidance about how to be aware of what is happening. Sometimes we should indeed decide to go with the flow. Sometimes we have to step back - and say no.

The Sedra¹ gives us an interesting warning regarding this issue. It is phrased in terms of Jewish life thousands of years ago, yet it is explained by our Sages in terms which are relevant today.

The overt topic in the Sedra is the Asheira tree. There may not be any in Kew Gardens, but the Talmud tells us this was a beautiful tree which was so enchanting that people used to worship it. There was something attractive and exciting about an Asheira. Worship of the Asheira was very common in ancient Canaan, and Jewish people were often enticed into it. The Torah warns against it several times.

In our Sedra there is an intriguing statement: "Do not plant an Asheira or any tree near the Altar of G-d."² The Altar of G-d is, of course, in the Temple in Jerusalem, or, during the centuries before Solomon built the Temple, in the Divine Sanctuary which was set up at a number of different locations in turn.

Now, why should anyone think of planting an Asheira tree in the

Sanctuary or Temple? Surely, a person either worships G-d or follows the Asheira cult. Why should he want to plant an Asheira tree near G-d's Altar in the Sanctuary?

The Lubavitcher Rebbe explains that this is speaking of a case when the person who is in charge of the Sanctuary and the Altar is an enthusiastic Jew who wants more and more people to come to the Sanctuary. He wants more and more people to appreciate how inspiring and fulfilling it is to serve G-d.

The problem is that not as many people as he would like are actually coming. So he has an idea. "Everyone is attracted by the Asheira tree. Let me plant one near the Altar and people will come flocking to the Sanctuary of G-d".

At this point the Torah gives a warning: do not imagine that this is right, or indeed effective. True, large crowds may initially come. Unfortunately people do flock to the Asheira. But since this attraction is itself forbidden, the initial success will not last. The intention is good: to bring more people to the Sanctuary. But the Asheira confuses the issue. Eventually Asheira worship might replace the Sanctuary altogether...

Now, is this relevant today? Imagine: a person is trying to promote a positive activity such as a charity evening. He or she gets the idea of having an "Asheira". What is an Asheira in this context? Something attractive and crowd pulling - which happens to be inappropriate in terms of the teachings of the Torah. In our Sedra the Torah warns: don't do it. You will be giving the wrong message which will eventually work against any initial apparent success.³

Of course, creative and exciting ideas, genuine positive crowd pullers, are vital in Jewish life today. Further, one needs a measure of sensitivity to decide what is an Asheira and what is just an innocent, permitted attraction. One may need to take advice (that's what Rabbis and Rebbetzins are for). One certainly needs thought. And there are times to resist the pressure. But we Jews are particularly good at that - and that is why we still exist!

1. Deuteronomy 16:18-21:9. 2. Deut. 16:21. 3. See the Lubavitcher Rebbe's *Yeyn Malchut* vol. 1 pp. 7a-5 commenting on Rambam, Yad, Laws of Idolatry 6:9.

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SEDRA SHOFETIM

BRIBERY...?

Debby swung open the gate to her front garden and ran up the path. "Hi everybody I'm home!" Today had been the first day of final week of her summer day camp.

Debby excitedly told her family at the supper table all about the stunning new ideas for arts and crafts, the brilliant game of netball they had played, and last but not least she told them about the play. It was going to be on the last day of camp, and all the parents would be invited to come and watch.

The play was named 'The Golden Shoes' and was set in the times of King Solomon. More than that she could not tell her family, they would have to come and see the play for themselves. Debby loved acting and she thought, hoped, HOPED, that perhaps she would be chosen to act the main role.

Debby came into the kitchen later that evening and sat on a chair watching her older sister Chava baking. She was making Swiss rolls filled with jam.

They looked really delicious, and Debby was hoping she would be allowed to taste some - she suddenly had an idea.

"Chava those Swiss rolls look really, really good." "Well, don't touch any, please, you can taste them later when they're finished and cooled down", her sister quickly responded.

“Chava, please would I be able to take one of them to my camp counsellor tomorrow. Or even half of one.”

This was Debby’s wonderful idea. Perhaps, if she would give her counsellor a cake, Debby explained to her older sister, maybe she would then be chosen for the leading role in the play.

Chava frowned when she heard this. “I don’t know,” she said. “It doesn’t sound quite right..”

“Why not?” asked Debby. “Don’t you have enough to spare me one?”

“It’s not that,” said Chava. She wrinkled her nose. “Listen to be truthful, I think that’s an awful idea Debby. The counsellor will choose whoever she thinks is capable. If that is you, then very good. If not, that’s just life. Actually it even speaks about something similar in this week’s Sedra. “

“What? It speaks about putting on a play?”

“No, it speaks about judges, and people in authority. The Sedra gives a whole list of qualities these people must have - and the type of lifestyle they must lead. One thing it says is that they must not accept bribes. That’s basically what you would be trying to do, bribe the counsellor.”

Debby went a little bit red. “I didn’t mean to do that...” she said, half in a whisper, because it wasn’t quite true.

“Listen Debby,” said Chava, “one of the Swiss rolls is ready to eat now. Why don’t we take it into the garden, with some fruit juice, and invite Mummy and whoever else is at home to join us, and have a bit of a feast?”

“Good idea,” said Debby. But what she was thinking was: “Chava, you’re a really good sister. Thank you!”

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