

"That you do not stray/turn after your own heart." (15:39)

What does it mean to "stray after one's heart"? In the *Talmud Berachos 12b*, *Chazal* state that this *pasuk* refers to apostasy. To turn after one's hearts is to become an *apikor'es*, a non-believer. *Horav Moshe Swift, z.l.*, expounds upon the remarkable and profound words of *Chazal* and their application in contemporary Jewish society.

The modern trend away from religion is by no means motivated by reason. There is no logic which "inspires" one to leave the fold. Wisdom is not a prerequisite for apostasy, and the agnostic is not necessarily an astute thinker. Those professors and intellectuals whose religious diatribe constantly denigrates *mitzvah* observance as archaic nonsense, and whose reputations as "great thinkers" give them license to expound ridiculous theories and interpretations in the name of Bible criticism and religious views, are nothing more than simple people who have fallen prey to the base desires of the heart. They attempt to veil their lack of backbone with the "logic" of non-religious dogma. The *apikor'es* is one who simply wants to take it easy and defer to his heart's passions and desires. Indeed, it is much easier to discredit a theory than to accept it. To be negative needs no conviction.

In interpreting this *pasuk*, *Chazal* delved deeply into human nature. The non-believer does not respond with his brain; it is all in the heart. To counteract the passions of the heart, man's whims and desires, his feelings and fancies, no intelligent reasoning, no erudite thinking, will suffice. Only through activity -- *mitzvos* in action-- in which the entire body is engaged in religious observance, can one succeed in quelling the inner voice of desire. *Mitzvos* and *maasim tovim*, good deeds, are the only defense against the overwhelming waves of the heart.

Horav Swift asserts that the validity of this idea is confirmed by *Chazal's* exposition regarding the attempted stoning of Calev and Yehoshua. In the *Talmud Sotah 35a*, *Chazal* state that although *Bnei Yisrael* appeared to have been throwing stones at Calev and Yehoshua, their aim was actually directed upwards toward Heaven. Was this a logical reaction to Calev and Yehoshua? This was not a rational response, but rather a childish backlash at Hashem! As we mentioned above, logic is not needed to reject faith; reason need not reign when ridiculing the Divine authority, and common sense is relegated to the wayside when defying moral discipline. We have but to look around and see a world following the inclinations of their heart, leading shallow meaningless lives, while throwing stones upwards toward the Source of all values.

We must bring the Divine into our hearts and homes. Our conscience must govern our heart's desires, and our intellect must dictate our innermost feelings. With courage and resolution, we will be able to affirm our convictions with positive action rather than resorting to the cowardice of negativity.