

Beware for yourselves lest your heart be misled and you turn away and serve other gods and bow down to them. (11:16)

Rashi interprets *v'sartem*, and you turn away, as referring to one who abandons Torah study. Accordingly, one who severs his relationship with Torah will ultimately become an idol worshipper. This is a strong statement. Will abandoning the Torah lead one so far away that he would serve idols? Apparently the answer is, "Yes." We wonder why. **Horav Shimon Schwab, zl**, addresses this question and explains that there are two diverse ways of understanding the term *elohim acheirim*, other gods.

The words, *elohim acheirim*, in the context of this *pasuk* can be defined either as "other gods," which would thus denote *elohim* as plural – gods. It can also be interpreted as a god of others, whereby *elohim* is singular, referring to a god that others have chosen to serve. Does it really make a difference? After all is said and done, he is not serving Hashem, the only G-d of Heaven and earth, the G-d of Creation and the G-d of history. *Rav Schwab* explains that, when someone strays from Torah learning, the Torah tells him that while he may still purport to believe in G-d – it is the *elohim acheirim*. It is not the Jewish G-d; it is another god, or perhaps the god of others, because the G-d of the Jews is intrinsically linked to the study of Torah. One cannot serve Hashem, yet abandon Torah study. They are one and the same. One who does so is essentially practicing another religion, serving another god, which is synonymous with idol worship.

These are strong words, but the truth will, at times, make some people uncomfortable. In his commentary to the *Siddur*, *Rav Schwab* expounds on this subject. One who attempts to worship Hashem without Torah study does not worship the Creator of the Universe, because the Jewish religion is inextricably bound to the Torah. We may act in a manner similar to members of other religions who also pray, observe rituals, maintain various prohibitions and enjoin their adherents to practice specific positive behaviors and deeds. Judaism, however, they are not practicing. Unless the Torah is included, the worship of G-d is nothing more than *elohim acheirim*. A gentile who wishes to embrace Judaism – to do and accept everything except Torah study – might as well remain connected with his original religion. A Jewish religion without the Torah is not Judaism – at all. Our Torah may not – and cannot – be divorced from the religion, its practice and observance. A "Torahless" Judaism is not Judaism.

Rashi explains the term *elohim acheirim*, "Because they are strangers to those who worship them. One pleads with it (the god), but it does not respond. Consequently, this 'other god' is a 'stranger' to the person who prays to it." *Rashi* is teaching us (as per *Rav Schwab*) that the first step on the road to actual idol worship is deserting the Torah. Despite one's attempt to maintain a relationship with Hashem, the interaction will be as different as if it were with a stranger. Without Torah learning, Hashem is "strange" to us.

The individual may still believe that *Hashem Echad*, Hashem is One, and that he certainly is not an

idol worshipper, but, as a result of his estrangement from Hashem, he no longer has the feeling that someone is listening to his prayers. Feeling unwanted, unlistened to, the person slowly drifts away to a “place” where he convinces himself that someone is listening. We all know where this is leading. One who seeks a relationship, but cannot seem to find it because he is not upholding his part of the equation, will conjure up in his mind some mystical experience and imagine that now “someone” is listening to him. Had the lost youth and adults of the last fifty years (and longer) been guided to the Torah – they would have been “found.”