

Moshe said to them: Did you let every female live? Behold It was they who caused Bnei Yisrael by the word of Bilaam, to commit a betrayal against Hashem regarding the matter of Pe'or. (31:15,16)

It is said how the most well-meaning – albeit quite insecure – leaders of factions of the religious Jewish community who call themselves Orthodox, but have yet to prove it, fall prey to the double-edged sword of Jew/non-Jew relationships. One cannot sufficiently emphasize how the blandishments of the non-Jewish society in which we live have had a disastrous influence on the religious vitality and continuity of our People. One need only to take a stroll outside of the shelter of the observant Jewish community to observe the downward spiral of Jewish literacy and commitment. The staggering rate of intermarriage is in and of itself the greatest proof of the need to strengthen ourselves from within - and to remain there – at all costs.

Alas, this is not a new problem. Two centuries ago in Germany, “it” had become an almost accepted norm, a way of life that was actually advocated by the latter-day followers of the Peor idol. The destruction wrought by the founding fathers of secular Judaism has germinated into a movement which would do Bilaam proud. Generations later, we have lost Jews who do not even know what they have lost – nor do they care. Yet, despite the apparent infamy of acculturation leading to total assimilation, we still have among us those who choose to embark upon the slippery slope of inter-religious dialogue, thereby shaming themselves and their supporters and causing a *chillul Hashem*, desecration of Hashem’s Name, of epic proportion.

The Torah reveals to us the identity of the source of the scourge of assimilation which leads to intermarriage: the Peor idol; its worship; and what it symbolized-- self-gratification. The cycle began when Klal Yisrael started to share with their pagan neighbors. First, it was their sacrifices, which led to intermingling with their women. The end result was total abdication to Peor, the god of the Midyanite people. The very nature of the worship of this idol, which involved expunging bodily wastes in its presence, only served as a vehicle for mocking the worthlessness of materialistic worship. Nonetheless, once he fell into its net, the worshipper was trapped. He had just become a pagan.

There is always a flipside. We just celebrated the festival of *Shavuot*, which underscores the merit of sincere conversion, as in the case of Rus, progenetress of the Davidic dynasty. We note the dignity and spiritual majesty of those who have been able to transcend their gentile heritage and choose to become members of the *Am Hashem*, the Nation of G-d. Indeed, *Chazal* observe that the entire Moavite and Amonite nations were spared for the specific purpose of producing the “two young doves,” a reference to Rus and Naamah, who were destined to descend from them. Sincere religious commitment has its place in Judaism. We respect and admire it, and we welcome into the fold those who manifest this trait.

One wonders why, after thousands of years during which we have clearly seen the tragic effects of assimilation, a group of Jewish “religious” leaders, among them representatives of a new brand of Orthodoxy, would, for the sake of ecumenical discourse, join in a Roman Catholic sponsored conference. (They refer to themselves as Orthodox. This author tends not to agree with the attribution.) This was part of a program sponsored by the Catholic center for study and prayer in the Galilee. Imagine a bonfire on the eve of *Lag Ba’Omer* under the imposing shadow of a gold statue of the pope. How heartwarming it must have been for the Catholics to witness Jewish and Catholic clergy dancing together, singing Jewish songs.

This is clearly a modern-day reenactment of the Peor idol. How tragic it is when people discard their intelligence and act in a manner unbecoming any intelligent Jew who is aware of our history. How sad it is when one reflects upon haunting memories of terror and persecution which are evoked by the Catholic church. Is there anything more deranged than selling one’s heritage for a bit of ecumenism? Is this any different than literally letting go of one’s bodily waste, making a total fool of oneself in the presence of an idol? “Good morning,” “Good evening” – diplomatic relations are nice and appropriate. Prostrating oneself before them and denigrating the meaning of the millions who died by their volition is another. It is totally unacceptable and bespeaks an unpardonable insult to the Jewish people and to Hashem.