

If this will be found among you... who commits evil... and he will go and serve gods of others... and it will be told to you and you will hear; then you will investigate well, and behold! It is true, the testimony is correct – this abomination was done in Yisrael. (17:2,4)

The Torah seems to employ a lengthy vernacular in order to describe this idol worshipper. The words, *ki yimatzei*, “If there will be found,” is an unusual phrase to describe the discovery of one who worships idols. It could simply have said, “If there will be among you.” “Finding” focuses on the detection of something unknown, whereas this case is one in which witnesses attest to a man’s guilt. It is a *fait accompli* – a done deal; it happened; now we must punish the sinner. Why does the Torah emphasize the next step in the process of establishing guilt: then you shall investigate well? What need is there for investigation? Witnesses have testified. The Torah implies that if we do not investigate the veracity of the testimony, guilt cannot be established. Why? In every other case of capital punishment the witnesses are believed and the dependent is punished – case closed.

Horav David Chananyah Pinto, Shlita, explains that an important lesson is being taught here. In the *Talmud Berachos 29a*, *Chazal* teach, *Gemiri tava lo hava bisha*, “A good man does not become bad.” Therefore, when we discover that one is guilty of idol worship, we must understand that the process of spiritual disintegration did not just begin. It goes back some time. One does not throw away his Judaism overnight. It is a process that began years earlier with some innocuous deviation from traditional observance. Over time it festered and germinated, until it grew into consummate rebellion. Why were we unaware of his nefarious activities? Because he was able to conceal them – either out of shame or weakness. Viewing it from a positive perspective, perhaps he thought he could turn himself around; and thus, he was not yet prepared to declare his mutiny.

In any event, today, here and now, the fellow has left the fold. How do we view this? The Torah teaches us that just as a lost object has actually always been here – only we were unaware of it; like-wise, this idol worshipper did not just decide today to take the plunge into spiritual extinction. It began much earlier – only it was covert. Therefore, we must investigate deeply into his past behavior and, after careful examination, we will discover that these activities have been going on for quite some time. Perhaps, if his original deviation had been caught and addressed earlier, he might still be with us.