

You shall not plant for yourselves an idolatrous tree - any tree - near the Altar of Hashem your G-d. (16:21)

Whether the tree was specifically designated for idol worship, or any tree planted near the *Bais Hamikdash*, it is forbidden - as it was the custom of the pagans to landscape their temples. The inside of the *Mikdash* is important, not the edifice's external beauty. From the juxtaposition of the *pasuk* concerning the idolatrous tree on to the *pesukim* about appointing judges, *Chazal* derive the importance of appointing only those judges who are reputable, G-d-fearing, honest men. It goes without saying that he must be erudite in all areas of Jewish law. Indeed, *Chazal* say that one who appoints an unqualified judge is tantamount to one who plants an *asheirah*. While the juxtaposition does convey a message, we should, however, endeavor to see what an *asheirah* has in common with an unqualified, unscrupulous judge.

Horav Chaim Soloveitchik, zl, suggests that while a "regular" idol is unmistakably an *avodah zarah*, because its appearance is not deceiving, the *asheirah* is different. Externally, the *asheirah* seems to be just another beautiful tree. Its sinister being, its evil essence, is concealed by its outer beauty. One might stumble; one might err and unwittingly come too close and fall under its influence. This is analogous to the unqualified judge, the inappropriate leader, the unscrupulous spiritual mentor who outwardly appears to be righteous, moral and upstanding, but behind closed doors is all a sham. Such leadership devours its followers, as they fail to see through the cloak of false righteousness.

We must ask ourselves whose fault it is that such a leadership continues to thrive. The *Torah* says, "*You shall not plant an asheirah.*" To plant is to sustain, to nurture, to care for and support. In other words: We put the *asheirah* there; we plant and care for it. Likewise, we keep on supporting and glorifying the "*asheiros*" of our generation. If we would not plant them and maintain them where they are, they would not be able to exert their harmful influence over their unsuspecting community.