

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

The idolators were accustomed to plant beautiful trees called "*asheiros*" at the entrance of their temples. To separate us from this idolatrous custom, the *Torah* prohibits the planting of any tree in the *Bais Ha'Mikdash* or, as *Chazal* have added, even on the entire *Har Ha'Bayis*. In the *Talmud*, *Sanhedrin 7b*, *Chazal* explain the juxtaposition of the prohibition of planting an *asheirah* to the injunction to appoint judges. They say it teaches us that one who appoints an unqualified judge is regarded as if he had planted an *asheirah*.

The commentators offer a number of reasons for equating appointing an incompetent judge with planting an *asheirah*. Simply, just as the creation of an idol makes a farce of divinity, so, too, an unsuitable or dishonest judge distorts the concept of justice. *Horav Tzvi Hirsch Ferber*, *z.l.*, suggests an interesting parallel between these two acts. Although the impurity of an idol is apparent, the *asheirah*, on the other hand, conceals its impurity. It looks just like any other tree!

A judge who conceals his own deficiency, who obscures his inability to render a *halachic* decision, is as reprehensible as the *asheirah*. This applies even to the erudite scholar, who attempts to mask his lack of character refinement and religious observance with his brilliance and scholarship. His internal *tumaah*, impurity, albeit camouflaged by an external facade of excellence, will ultimately be exposed as a mockery of justice.

*Horav Moshe Shternbuch*, *Shlita*, suggests a novel homiletic thought. The pagans planted the *asheirah* to beautify their temples. Our sacred houses of worship need no external esthetics to beautify them. Their inner beauty, symbolized by the *Torah* study and prayer which are the foci of these structures, brilliantly shine forth. To add to their beauty is to imply that something is lacking from their essence. The same idea may apply to a *Torah* leader. His essence is his *Torah* scholarship and the manner in which it is integrated into his character and entire demeanor. To suggest that a *talmud chacham* is lacking something if he does not have some other form of "esthetic" title -- or is not proficient in other areas of knowledge -- demeans the *Torah* knowledge which is his essence.