

"Take all the chiefs of the people and hang them up unto Hashem in the face of the sun." (25:4)

Many Jews accepted the invitation of the Midianite and Moavite women to join them in a sacrificial festival to their god, *Baal-Peor*. Although it was not the leaders of the tribes that sinned, they did not manage to prevent others from committing the gravest sins with the pagan women.

Sforno comments that their sin progressed gradually. They began by exhibiting licentious behavior with the pagan women, followed by eating their sacrifices, until, ultimately, they began worshiping their idols. The apathy the leaders demonstrated by observing thousands succumbing to the wiles of the *yetzer hora* without themselves doing anything in protest, was the source of their guilt. Those who could, but did not, intervene were just as guilty as the actual perpetrators. Their atonement would, therefore, be achieved by permitting the transgressors to be hung in public without dissent or arbitration. *Sforno's* point is very obvious. Those who sit back, who turn their heads away in indifference, share the blame with the actual sinners. The sinner becomes encouraged when he sees that no one is protesting his actions.

We may add something else to consider. Apparently, the sinner has very little respect for the community around him. Why else would he blatantly perform such perfidious acts of rebellion against Hashem? The question we must ask ourselves is: Why do they have such little respect for us? What hypocrisy do they observe in our behavior that promotes their disdain for us? Are our activities above reproach? Are we sincere in our observance of *Torah* and *mitzvos*, or do we leave something to be desired in our own spiritual activity? We suggest that the barometer of our sincere religious observance is the activities of those Jews around us.

In the *Talmud Sandhedrin 82*, *Chazal* relate that when the members of the tribe of Shimon were found guilty, they went to their *Nasi*, Zimri, and charged, "We are being judged and you remain quiet! What are you going to do about it?" When Zimri heard the accusation leveled at him, he immediately assembled twenty-four thousand Jews and proceeded to go to Moshe. "If what these people did was illicit, then who permitted you to marry a Midianite woman?" Zimri countered to Moshe. "What makes your action more acceptable than theirs?" Zimri complained. Immediately after this "opening" statement, Zimri proceeded to blatantly commit an act of debasement with *Casbi bas Tzur*, the princess of Moav. Zimri's charge against Moshe does not make sense. These people warranted the death penalty for worshiping idols. What did Zimri accomplish by permitting harlotry with the pagan women? Zimri's claim for clemency was not consistent with his actions.

Horav Elyakim Schlesinger, Shlita, responds with a lesson that is relevant to contemporary times. Zimri held the opinion that the Jews worshipped the idols only because they were not permitted to have a relationship with the women. Had they been permitted to bring these women into the Jewish camp, they would have had no reason to wander and fall into the clutches of idol-worship. Zimri felt Moshe was too restrictive in regard to the Jews. He felt as many of our alienated brethren feel. We should loosen the restrictions, relax the discipline, give in a little in order to

contain the Jewish men. Break some rules, inject some "seductiveness" into the laws, take into consideration the blandishments of these women, to which the Jewish men were subject.

This was Zimri's mistake. He did not realize that compromise in the area of Jewish law is equivalent to rejecting it altogether. There is a significant difference between flexibility and compromise. Not one iota of the *Torah* may be changed - regardless of the specifics of the situation or external pressure imposed. Zimri attempted to prevent *Klal Yisrael's* downfall into the abyss of idol-worship. He sought to thwart their spiritual demise. His mistake was in thinking that we have license to sanction one sin in order to prevent another. He should have thought about the domino effect of sin. One who falls into the clutches of the *yetzer hora* has a difficult time extricating himself.