

You shall safeguard My charge not to do any of the abominable traditions that were done before you. (18:30)

This *pasuk* is enigmatic. One would think that the purpose of observing *mitzvos*, of safeguarding the *Torah's* dictate, would be to develop a closer relationship with Hashem. We attain a level of spiritual ascendancy commensurate with our commitment to observe. That, however, is not what the *Torah* says. We are adjured to safeguard the *Torah*, so that we will decline to perform the abominable practices of the heathens into whose land we are entering! While these seem to be pretty strong words, it is not uncommon to find such statements throughout the *Torah*. One who observes, grows. In contrast, one who rejects the *Torah* is apt to fall to the nadir of depravity. Indeed, in the *Talmud Chagigah 5b*, Chazal refer to this sudden descent as falling "t,ehng trn trdhtn" "from a high roof to a deep pit."

It has happened to so many. The first one in the *Torah* was Kayin, who slew his brother after Hashem rejected his sacrifice. Imagine, one who converses with the Al-mighty and understands the meaning of sacrifices. In a fit of anger and depression he transforms himself into a blasphemer who kills his brother! Such is the effect of the *yetzer hora*, evil inclination, on one who is susceptible. *Klal Yisrael* did it with the Golden Calf. Immediately after receiving the *Torah* and achieving an unparalleled plateau of closeness to Hashem, they fell to the depths and made an idol. What happened? They were distraught and scared. Moshe was late in returning. What did these people who had experienced the revelation of Hashem do? They made a golden calf. Is that a well thought-out reaction or is it weakness exemplified? There is also the story of Rus and Orpah who were willing to sacrifice everything in order to embrace Judaism. Orpah decided, however, to return home. What happened to her? Did she retain her present level of commitment? No--once she returned home, she stooped to harlotry! Overnight, she fell from a high roof to a deep pit.

Horav Chaim Shmulevitz, zl, cites these and other instances in which people suddenly fell from the heights of spirituality to the nadir of blasphemy. He explains that a person must constantly be on guard when he feels that he is undergoing a spiritual descent. He must immediately "cushion" the fall, ultimately limiting the damage produced by the fall. Actually, the plunge itself is far more damaging than the specific level to which one has descended. Only a person who does not lose control, regardless of his present predicament, will succeed in regaining his former spiritual position. Indeed, he might even inadvertently benefit from the experience.

The key to spiritual survival is not simply surviving the depths into which one has fallen. It is the

ability to endure the actual plunge, to be able to overcome the sudden effect of descending from the high to the low, to accept the challenge to maintain one's self control: that is the prime test.

Horav Shmulevitz suggests that *Shlomo Ha'melech* serves as the paradigm of inner strength and self-control in the face of adversity. *Shlomo* ruled the world; his brilliance was manifest in his every endeavor. He literally was on top of the world. However, he fell; he fell from the zenith of success to the depth of failure. *Chazal* tell us that in the end, all that *Shlomo Ha'melech* ruled over was his own cane! He was left with nothing but a cane! Yet, he reigned over this cane. Until the very end, *Shlomo Ha'melech* was a *melech*; he did not succumb to depression. He maintained mastery over himself, despite tremendous challenges. He remained regal, dignified and noble, even under the most degrading circumstances. He fell--but bounced back and became the king of *Klal Yisrael* once again. If one cushions the fall, the damage can be but temporary.