

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

An idolatrous tree refers either to a tree which was worshipped (as was the accepted service of the pagans) or to any kind of tree that is planted in the proximity of the *Mizbayach*. The idolators would often landscape their idols and temple with lush foliage and trees in order to attract worshippers to its aesthetically enhanced surroundings. *Chazal* (*Sanhedrin* 7B) focus on the juxtaposition of *asheirah* to *dayanim*, judges. *Reish Lakish* says, “If one appoints an unqualified judge over the community, it is as if he has planted an *asheirah* in *Yisrael*.” In a well-known exposition, *Horav Chaim Soloveitchik, zl*, explains that the average idol has distinguishing features which single it out as something used for pagan worship. As such, people understand the need to distance themselves from it. The *asheirah*, however, is a beautiful tree, growing majestically. What could be wrong with such a tree? The Torah teaches us that not every tree that grows tall, lush and aesthetically appealing is worthy of admiration. If its roots are embedded with *avodah zarah*, idol worship, then it is abominable in Hashem’s eyes.

Likewise, some people – even *dayanim* – superficially appear righteous. They put on a wonderful show, speak eloquently and present themselves as refined, moral and spiritually- committed. Upon closer examination, however, we see a corrupt, incompetent, self-serving individual, whose moral and spiritual compass is woefully lacking. Like the *asheirah*, they are trees planted with the unholy purpose of deceiving and leading others astray.

Perhaps we may add to this idea. Why do we have a prohibition concerning planting? What message do we derive from the planting of the *asheirah*? The planting teaches us that the tree’s spiritual flaws as an *avodah zarah* hark back to its roots. Similarly, the corrupt *dayan* did not suddenly fall from grace; it was a process that had begun with the flawed planting of his youth. At home and at school, he manifested tendencies that led to skewed growth. He was taught Torah and *mitzvos* as information to be absorbed as knowledge. He did not focus on the transformative effect of Torah. *Mitzvos* were taught as ritual – not as intrinsic to this relationship with the Divine. He became like an *asheirah*. The tree may stand tall, but, if its roots are embedded in shallow ground, it will topple with the first wind. Such a *dayan* who leads a community is an *asheirah* in disguise, and equally as dangerous.