

The Importance of Being Earnest

For Ki Tavo

In Parashat Ki Tavo we read of a momentous event which the Israelites are told to stage after crossing the Jordan River into the Promised Land. The whole nation must gather at the plain near the twin peaks of Gerizim and Eval, overlooking the ancient city of Shekhem, and conduct a ceremony in which a special curse will be put upon people who commit certain crimes.

The nation was to ascend the two mountains, two huge human swarms filling every nook and cranny, standing on precipices and in the crevices of the rock, neck to neck, shoulder to shoulder. The tribes of Shimeon, Levy, Yehudah, Yisakhar, Yosef, and Binyamin, were to stand on Mount Gerizim, the mountain of blessing, while the tribes of Reuven, Gad, Asher, Zevulun, Dan, and Naftali would have been standing on Mount Eval, the mountain of the curse.

As those multitudes were standing there, feeling more than ever the unity of the nation and simultaneously the enormous divide which can separate brothers, lovers, and friends, the Levites were to raise their voice from upon the blessed mountain, and chant in unison a series of threats to potential sinners, following a formula of: "cursed is he who does so and so." After each declaration by the Levites the whole nation, on both mountains, had to shout back a resounding Amen.

Such an event had to be orchestrated meticulously. Ascending the mountains, paving roads and providing food and drink for the multitudes, and even training the Levites to chant their verses in unison, were daunting tasks, so they must have been conducted for a very noble cause.

I challenge the readers to stop here and think: what crimes justify such an extravagant undertaking? If you are reading this bulletin at the Shabbat table with your children or friends, stop and ask them this question.

If we look at the list of prohibitions chanted by the Levites, we will find that they are a surprisingly mixed bag. Here is an abridged list of these transgressions: 1. Making a graven or molten image; 2. Disrespecting one's parents; 3. Trespassing; 4. Misleading a blind man; 5. Not providing fair trial for the orphan and the widow; 6. Incest with a father's wife; 7. Bestiality; 8.

Incest with half-sisters; 9. Incest with mother-in-law; 10. Murder; 11. Accepting bribe in order to kill an innocent person; 12. Not sustaining the words of the Torah.

Some of the transgressions such as idolatry, bestiality, incest, or murder, are so serious that we wonder why the Giving of the Law on Mount Sinai is not sufficient to inculcate them in the Nation's unified heart. Others, such as moving the fence an inch into your neighbor's property, giving wrong directions to a blind person, or talking back to one's parents, seem completely trivial.

This leads us to the next question: what is the common thread to all these warnings?

The answer is that it is all about pretense and transparency. The Torah warns us against hypocrites who pretend to be righteous but are engaged in illicit and illegal activities. The key word of the Parasha is **בְּסֵתֶר** – in hiding. It appears in connection with items 1 and 10, and again in the apocalyptic prophecy in chapter 28 verse 57.

Let us look again at the list, which contains 12 items, symbolically corresponding to the 12 tribes of Israel, and this time we will pay special attention to the aspects of hypocrisy and covert actions.

In item 1, the full text refers to one who makes idols and keeps them in hiding. He projects an image of a righteous monotheist but secretly practices paganism. Item 2, which speaks about disrespect towards parents, uses the word **מִקְלָה** which literally means to make light. It could be understood as referring to one who does not care for what his parents say and takes them lightly, while not necessarily showing it publicly. Item 3, trespassing, refers to moving one's fence into a neighbor's field, an action which can extend secretly over days and weeks, appropriating significant swaths of land. Item 4, misleading a blind man, is the epitome of a covert sin, as the victim does not know he has been wronged even if it is done in broad daylight. Item 5 focuses on injustice for the orphan and the widow because unlike people with positions of power, they will most probably not protest, thus keeping the matter hidden. Item 6-9 speak of only some of the forbidden sexual activities, seemingly those which are kept under heavy secrecy (the type of relationships mentioned here is of a common nature, but this is a matter for a future discussion).

Item 10, which is understood as murder, is actually presented as **אָרוּר מְכַה רֵעֵהוּ בְּסֵתֵר** – cursed is the one who raises his hand against his friend in hiding. It might very well refer to those who engage in gossip and calumny, creating a rumor factory with untraceable origins. The language here is reminiscent of the verse in Psalms (101:5): **מִלְּשׁוֹנִי בְּסֵתֵר וְרֵעֵהוּ** – one who uses his tongue in secrecy against his friend. The series of transgressions culminates with the warning against accepting bribe. It speaks of one who takes bribe in order to kill an innocent person, but that seem too blatant and callous. I would suggest to read the verse with a pause in the middle: Cursed is he who takes bribe [for any distortion of justice will eventually lead] to the killing of innocents.

Finally, the Torah concludes that one should sustain and follow ALL the laws of the Torah, meaning that it is not enough to project a religious image and that we must internalize the teachings of the Torah, applying them to all aspects of our lives.

A similar warning could be found in Psalm 73, where the author speaks of the religious leaders, the priests, who use the Temple as their treasure trove, abusing the people and portraying themselves as God's representatives on earth:

שִׁתּוּ בַשָּׁמַיִם פִּיהֶם וְלִשְׁוֹנָם תְּהַלֵּךְ בָּאָרֶץ

They [pretend] that their mouth is based in heavens, but meanwhile their [evil] tongue controls the earth.

Many centuries later, according to the Talmud (Sotah 22:2) King Yannai (Alexander Jannaeus, 127-76 BCE) told his wife: Do not be afraid of the observant or the non-observant, but rather of the hypocrites, those who pretend to be observant but in reality are not.

Today's observant Jewish world is plagued, just as it was in the past, with those who claim the titles of observant, religious, etc. but in practice distort justice and Halakha by engaging in gossip and calumny, passing judgment on others, and relying on external code dress to project a religious image.

The Torah commands us to organize this mass-attended event in order to remind us that no matter how hard we try to hide our actions, they will have long lasting and visible results on the whole community, nation, and world.

In other words, the Torah asks us to focus less in judging others and labeling them as non-observant or not religious, and instead make sure that we are responsible for our actions and are completely honest and transparent with each other.

שבת שלום

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Riddles for Ki Tavo:

Two important positions in the UN are alluded to in the Parasha. One is mentioned in reference to the one and only, and the other in reference to one of thousands. What are they?

Of the three winged creatures, it is the smallest you should fear more in nature, since the bigger is only a metaphor.

The Israeli TV personality whose name translates to “will sing European capital” wrote a song about Israel in which he turned the metallic curse into a blessing.

Answers for Ki Tetze:

Easy: the bird and the captive are both sent away.

Expert: Rav Sa’adiah Gaon was born in Fayyum Egypt, in 842.