

Beware the Ubiquitous Abomination

For Ki Tetze

a·bom·i·na·tion – noun, a thing that causes disgust or hatred.

Synonyms: atrocity, disgrace, horror, obscenity, outrage, evil, crime, monstrosity, anathema, bane.

When we hear the word abomination, especially in a biblical or religious context, we immediately associate it with paganism, idolatry, human sacrifices, blasphemy, promiscuity, incest, and other abominable actions which have no place in a modern, civilized society. We do not encounter abominations on a daily basis [thanks heaven], and we definitely do not think of them as a ubiquitous hazard which we must watch for constantly. As a matter of fact, in a cursory search I was able to retrieve an answer to the question “what does the bible have to say about abomination?” As I expected, the 85 responses were pretty much in line with the description given above.

Also, as expected, one very important biblical verse is missing from the list, a verse which describes the most common form of abomination. It is one which poses a great threat to our nation and our economy, and probably one of which we are all guilty, in one way or another. I am referring to the one mentioned in our Parasha (Deut. 25:13-16):

לֹא־יִהְיֶה לְךָ בְּכִיסֶּךָ אָבֹן וְאָבֹן גְּדוֹלָה וְקֹטְנָה: לֹא־יִהְיֶה לְךָ בְּבֵיתֶךָ אֵיפָה וְאֵיפָה גְּדוֹלָה וְקֹטְנָה. אָבֹן שְׁלֹמָה וְצֹדֵק יִהְיֶה־לְךָ אֵיפָה שְׁלֹמָה וְצֹדֵק יִהְיֶה־לְךָ לְמַעַן יֵאָרִיכוּ יָמֶיךָ עַל הָאָדָמָה אֲשֶׁר־יִי אֱלֹקֶיךָ נָתַן לָךְ, כִּי תוֹעֲבֹת יִי אֱלֹקֶיךָ כָּל־עֲשֵׂה אֵלֶּה כֹּל עֲשֵׂה עוֹל

You shall not carry in your pouch two different weights, a small one and a big one; You shall not keep at home two volume measure, a small one and a big one; You shall have one weight and pursue justice, you shall have one volume measure and pursue justice, in order for you to live long life upon the earth which God bequeaths you, for he who does one of these, he who distorts justice, is an abomination in front of God.

In his fascinating books *Predictably Irrational* and *The (Honest) Truth About Dishonesty*, Prof. Dan Ariely explores the human mind as it sets out to rationalize such actions which the Torah would have denounced as abominable.

Ariely found out that the more remote the act of cheating is from the victim, the greater is the tendency to cheat. When people had to report a test result to collect a reward they cheated less when they collected a coupon and then moved to another room to collect the reward, because now the act of cheating had one additional degree of separation from its gain.

In another study, customers who got more change than they deserve chose to return it to a local store but not to a clerk at a big chain store, because “they have enough money”. They did so while ignoring the fact that in both cases it will be the clerk who will have to pay the difference. Surprisingly enough, talking to the subjects of the study about honesty before entering the store had no influence on the results.

A disturbing fact is that the amount of money embezzled each year in the United States is a hundred times greater than that lost to thefts and robberies. We can learn from these studies and facts that the definition of sin, transgression, and abomination, is subjective. It also seems people judge the permissibility of deceit and embezzlement by factor of the distance from the victim and the possibility of being caught.

When it comes to Judaism, though many people tend to calibrate observant Jews by beard, garb, and headgear, the Torah teaches us that honesty in business and the respect for other people's property is right up there with the rejection of idolatry, murder, and incest.

In a business ethics class I am teaching, we were discussing this week some texts from Maimonides' Mishne Torah (Laws of Commerce, 18:1-14):

אָסוּר לְרַמּוֹת אֶת בְּנֵי אָדָם בְּמַקָּח וּמִמְכָּר אוֹ לְגַנוֹב אֶת דְּעֻמָּתוֹ, וְאֶחָד עוֹבֵד כּוֹכָבִים וְאֶחָד יִשְׂרָאֵל שְׂוִים בְּדַבָּר זֶה, הָיָה יוֹדֵעַ שֶׁיֵּשׁ בְּמַמְכָּרוֹ מוּם יוֹדִיעוֹ לְלוֹקֵחַ, וְאִפְּלוּ לְגַנוֹב דְּעַת הַבְּרִיּוֹת בְּדַבָּרִים אָסוּר

One is not allowed to deceive others in commerce or misinform them, and this law applies equally to Jews and pagans. If one knows that the merchandise is defected, he must inform the buyer. Even words of deceit, which do not lead to action, are forbidden.

Or take for example this interesting law, which specifically refers to the practice of Muslims to buy from Jews meat which was prepared according to the laws of ritual slaughtering but was deemed non-kosher for Jews (horse meatballs at Ikea, anyone?):

וְאִין מוֹכְרִין בֶּשֶׂר נְבִילָה לְנֹכְרִי בְּכִלְלֵי שְׁחוּטָה אִף עַל פִּי שְׁהַנְבִּילָה אֶצְלוֹ כְּשְׁחוּטָה

One cannot sell non-kosher meat to a non-Jew, claiming that it is kosher, even though it makes no difference for the buyer.

Other entries in that chapter deal with fair competition, honesty in advertising, full disclosure and other concepts which we tend to associate with modern societies. The participants in the class remarked how amazing it is that these concepts are codified by Maimonides, who used the Mishna as a source, and that those 2,000 years old texts go back to a much earlier one, the Torah.

In another section of his Mishne Torah (Laws of Theft, 8:20), Maimonides writes:

תִּבְבִּין בֵּית דִּין לְהַעֲמִיד שׁוֹטְרִים בְּכָל מְדִינָה וּמְדִינָה וּבְכָל פְּלֶגֶף וּפְלֶגֶף וְשִׁיחֵיו מְחַזְרִין עַל הַתְּנִיחוֹת וּמְצַדְקִין אֶת
הַמֵּאֻנָּגִים וְאֶת הַמְּדוֹת

It is the rabbinical court's responsibility to appoint policemen in every state and county, to visit stores and check the accuracy of measurements, weights, and scales.

Since we have a rich tradition which emphasizes the importance of ethical behavior in commerce and business, why is it not part and parcel of our religious worldview today?

I believe that part of the answer lies with the structure of the Shulhan Arukh and our tendency to cling to rituals.

As you know, Rabbi Yosef Karo divided his Shulhan Arukh into four volumes, but only one of them – Orah Haim, merited a populist commentary which made it accessible for all. That part deals with the daily routine and the holidays. All monetary and criminal laws are detailed in the part titles Hoshen Mishpat, and Rabbi Karo trusted that people will turn to that volume to learn and internalize the laws of business ethics. He therefore made a very short reference to it in his Orah Haim. There, tucked between 155 chapters dealing with the daily prayers, and 540 chapters dealing with Shabbat and Holidays, hides one tiny chapter, 84 words long, which deals with the workday itself.

Of that tiny chapter, number 156, only seven words speak of business ethics:

אַחַר כִּד גִּלְגַּל לְעִסְקָיו... וַיֵּשֶׂא וַיִּתֵּן בְּאַמּוּנָה

After [the morning prayers] one should conduct his business... and he should do so ethically...

We must raise awareness to those seven words and dedicate as much time to the details of these laws as we do to the laws of Shabbat, Kahrut, and prayers. I wholeheartedly believe that adherence to this important concept, which is at the core of the Torah's system of social justice and equality, should fill us with pride for being the keepers of our glorious tradition.

שבת שלום

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Riddles for Ki Tetze:

Easy: What is the common fate of the bird and the captive?

Expert: I was born in the land mentioned last in the Parasha, but lived most of my life in another.

To find my birth year: (Second fine x Ammonite generations) + (first fine x garment's corners) – (Egyptian generations x Edomite generations x number of wives).

Answers for Shofetim: All these words **עין**, **יד חלק דם**, **שן רגל עין** appear twice, consecutively, in the Parasha.

Expert: The judge is Samson who referred to his wife as **עגלה** (Judges 14:18). The commander is Raphael Eitan.