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On The Parsha

In Parshas Nitzavim, Moshe Rabbeinu reminds the nation of what they observed while living among the nations: “And you saw their abominations and their repugnant idols, of wood and stone, silver and gold, which were with them.” (Devarim 29:16).

The verse is phrased unusually. The wood and stone idols are merely described as seen, while the silver and gold idols are described as “with them.” Rashi explains that the wooden and stone idols were left in public because their owners did not fear theft. The silver and gold idols, however, were kept “with them”—locked away in private treasure chambers—because their owners feared these costly idols might be stolen.

It would appear that Rashi is teaching us something deeper than the practical point that valuables are locked away while inexpensive items are left outside.

The idolater calls the object a god. He bows to it, brings offerings, and attributes power to it. Yet his actions tell a different story: he locks it in his treasure chamber with his coins and jewelry because he fears someone may steal it.

One does not lock up a god; one locks up property. The owner’s behavior admits what his worship denies: the idol cannot protect itself, a thief can overpower it, and its worth lies only in the value of the gold and silver that it is made of. The wooden and stone idols make the same point from the opposite direction. They are left unguarded because they are not worth guarding, and their owners know it.

This is why Moshe says, “you saw.” He is asking them to remember what they observed firsthand: the gap between what the nations claimed and how they actually behaved. Rashi on the previous verse (Devarim 29:15) explains the danger: “Since you saw the idolatrous nations, perhaps one

of you was enticed to follow their ways.” Seeing idolatry up close could be dangerous because it was alluring. But Rashi on our verse shows that the same experience also exposed its falsehood. Anyone who paid attention to where the idols were kept had already seen the system undermine itself.

Moshe teaches the nation that, “Actions speak louder than words.”

Halacha – Jewish Law

QUESTION: I enjoy shopping at Bingo, a supermarket that offers handheld price scanners for quick checkout without waiting in line.

To use the scanners for fruits and vegetables, however, customers must first weigh the produce on a scale. The scale prints a label, which the customer then scans. Because the store has only a limited number of these scales, lines can form. Today, one woman was weighing about twenty-five bags of produce while others waited. I was tempted to put up a small sign reading, “ONLY TWO WEIGHINGS PER CUSTOMER WHILE OTHERS ARE WAITING.” I know this would be wrong, but I would appreciate a response explaining the Halachic implications of doing so.

ANSWER: As you already recognize, the sign should definitely not be posted. A sign that appears to state store policy puts into writing something untrue. If the manager authorizes it, a differently worded sign—or simply speaking to the manager—may be appropriate.

The sign works only because readers would assume management created the policy written on the sign. Since no such policy exists, the sign communicates a falsehood, and does so in writing. The Rishonim and Acharonim who discuss written falsehood include it within the prohibition, and many authorities view it as more severe transgression than

a spoken lie because it involves an actual Ma'aseh (action). When one author inferred from the Maharsha (Chiddushei Aggados, Bava Basra 15a, regarding how Moshe could write "And Moshe died") that written falsehood is permitted, and connected that inference to a line in Rav Nachman of Breslov's Sefer HaMiddos (Emes, letter nun), the Kli Chemda (Rav Meir Dan Plotzki, 1866–1928, in a letter rather than in his Chumash commentary) responded, "Heaven forbid that one say such a thing!" and attributed the line to a mistaken student.

The basic Halachic prohibition is "Midvar Sheker Tirchak"—distance yourself from falsehood (Shemos 23:7). Although some Rishonim limit the prohibition to judges in a court case (Orach Meisharim 9:1) or to lies that cause harm (Sefer Yereim, Mitzvah #235), the normative view is that it is a Torah prohibition that applies to everyone, even when no harm results. This is the view of the Sefer Chareidim (Mitzvos Asei 4:26) and the Chofetz Chaim (Ahavas Chesed). In Sefas Tamim (Chapter 7), the Chofetz Chaim adds, citing the Sifre on "V'Halachta Bidrachav"—you shall walk in His ways (Devarim 28:9), that because truthfulness is one of Hashem's ways, lying also violates the positive commandment to walk in His ways.

Chizuk - Inspiration

In sixteenth-century Egypt, Rabbi Dovid ibn Abi Zimra—the Radbaz—was the country's leading Halachic authority. A self-styled scholar under his jurisdiction became convinced that certain spellings in the Sefer Torah were incorrect. Since the Zohar seemed to indicate different readings, he reasoned, what source could be more authoritative than Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai? He then took a quill and began "correcting" Sifrei Torah accordingly.

When the Radbaz heard what was happening, he did not send a messenger or issue a ruling from his study. He went personally to confront the man. In the man's home, he found that three Sifrei Torah had already been altered. In his own words, he "removed his so-called corrections," restored the Sifrei Torah to their original text, and issued a formal written decree forbidding the man to ever alter a Torah text on the basis of the Zohar.

The would-be corrector did not accept the decree quietly. He resented it and even threatened the elderly rabbi. The

Radbaz's inspiring response, preserved in his responsa (Cheilek Dalet, Siman 101), was: "I feared not his words, for I was not doing this for my glory nor for the honor of my father's house, but in order that dissensions shall not be multiplied in Israel, and in order that our Torah shall not be made into two Torahs."

He added another concern. In sixteenth-century Egypt, Jews lived among Muslims who claimed that the Jews had tampered with their own Torah—adding, subtracting, and altering it at will. "If they should note that the Torah Scrolls are at variance with one another, how much more will they be entrenched in their belief." A single altered Sefer Torah was therefore not merely a private mistake; it was a breach in the credibility of the entire people.

The Radbaz was wealthy, took no salary, and needed nothing from anyone. At first blush, he may have had little to gain by confronting this man and could easily have ignored the matter. Instead, he went to the man's house personally, fixed the Sifrei Torah with his own hands, endured the man's threats, and explicitly denied any personal stake in the outcome. Here, integrity meant protecting the integrity of the Torah's text—without regard for personal honor, comfort, or safety.

*"May I back out of a school carpool that
I have already committed to?"
"Should I report a co-worker who is acting dishonestly?"*

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