



Sermon Tidbits

AUGUST 31, 2015

Parashat Ki Tavo

Dangerous Secrets

Cursed be he that smites his neighbor in secret (Deuteronomy 27:24) (אָרוּר מִכָּה רֵעֵהוּ בְּסֵתֶר (דְּבָרִים כ"ז:כ"ד))

As he lay ill, close to death, the students of the great sage Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai crowded around his bed, hoping for some final words of wisdom and blessing from their master and teacher. “Rabbi,” they begged him, “Bless us!” The rabbi said to them, “May it be the will [of the Holy One] that the fear of heaven is upon you as much as the fear of your fellow man.” The students were unimpressed. They were hoping for blessings of spirituality, enlightenment and wisdom. But all their teacher could muster as his final blessing to them was that they feared God as much as they feared the person in the next room. They said to him, “That’s all?” He replied to them, “If only [you can attain this]! You will see [how important this is], for when a person wants to commit a transgression, he says, I hope no one will see me.” (Talmud Berachot 28b)

As much as we may think too highly of ourselves to believe it, one strong motivation against sin is social pressure. So, we commit our sins in private in an attempt to prevent others from discovering the worst in us. It was precisely this type of transgression—the act committed in secret—that Moses warns the Children of Israel to avoid. Before issuing the great rebuke (*tochecha*), delineating the suffering the Jewish nation would endure should they abandon the Torah, Moses describes in great detail a ceremony of blessings and curses that the nation must conduct after it crosses the Jordan River into the Promised Land.

With half the tribes standing on Mount Gerizim and the other half on Mount Eival, the tribe of Levi was instructed to stand in the valley between the two mountains and pronounce a series of blessings and curses that would befall those who either keep or abandon the Torah. Included among those who would be cursed are: “he that dishonors his father and mother...he that removes his neighbor’s landmark...he that makes the blind go astray...he that perverts the justice due the stranger, the orphan and widow...he that smites his neighbor in secret...” (27:15-25) In total, Moses lists eleven different behaviors that justify a divine curse, and after each declaration the nation must say, “Amen!” Why does Moses list these eleven specific sins? What connection binds them together? Ibn Ezra (on verse 15) explains: “The reason [that the verse mentions these eleven sins] is because they can be committed in secret...” Public crimes fall under the legislation of the courts, but courts cannot right wrongs committed in private, behind closed doors, under the shadow of secrecy.

Secrecy allows us to commit acts we would never contemplate in the light of day under the watchful eyes of others. We truly do act differently when we believe no one is watching—it’s a part of human nature. What’s true of individuals applies just as powerfully to governments. When allowed to act without any oversight, secrecy too often gives governments the license to abuse individual rights, violate accepted legal norms and even international agreements. This is precisely why the secret side deal on self-inspection that Iran has reached with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) allowing Iran to collect soil samples at the Parchin military facility should cause all of us a great deal of concern. According to [NBC News](#), a U.S. Senator briefed on the agreement said that it is “categorically untrue that IAEA inspectors will be inside the Parchin facility while soil samples are being taken.” Rather, the IAEA will be outside the facility where the soil samples are being taken. John Cornyn of Texas, the second-ranking Republican senator, said that, “Trusting Iran to inspect its own nuclear site and report to the U.N. in an open and transparent way is remarkably naive and incredibly reckless.”

This side deal also represents a dangerous change to established arms control protocol, establishing a new precedent which could prevent the IAEA from inspecting future suspect Iranian military facilities. Over the past two years, the Obama Administration has told lawmakers and reporters that any deal with Iran would require Iran to provide IAEA's international inspectors robust access to the Parchin military base. "Don't trust, but verify" was the stated mantra guiding the negotiations. Clearly, the side agreement does not bear this out. These secret side deals raise another important concern: As the agreement with Iran allows the IAEA to create secret side deals with Iran, how can Congress honestly approve a deal when it doesn't have all of the facts?

The fact that Iran will be the one to investigate its own suspected illicit nuclear weaponization activity is grounds enough for America to seek a better agreement. Add to that the fact that Congress cannot approve a deal that it cannot review, and we can only conclude that Congress must reject this deal and urge the administration to work with our allies to maintain economic pressure on Iran. In time, this will lead Iran to return to negotiations to forge a better deal that will truly close off all of its paths to a nuclear weapon. ■

Sharing a Hidden Treasure

The blessing with you in your barns (Deuteronomy 28:8)

הברכה באסמך (דברים כח:ה)

As stock markets around the world turned volatile last week, some financial analysts gave their clientele an interesting piece of advice: "Don't look." Jerry Singleton, chief executive of Signal Securities in Fort Worth [said](#), "I tell a lot of my clients to turn off the TV and throw away the magazines and just stick with your long-term plan." If you have a solid long-term strategy and a diversified portfolio, you don't want to know the sordid details. Just be patient and wait out the storm. Without realizing it, these financial advisors were borrowing good advice from the Talmud.

Before delivering the strong, jarring words of rebuke (*tochecha*) which describe the terrible calamities that would befall the Jewish people should they abandon the Torah, Moses first describes the great blessings the people would enjoy should they follow the spiritual guidelines he has given them. "Blessed shall you be in the city, and blessed shall you be in the field..." (28:3) Among many other blessings, Moses promises that, "Adonai will command the blessing with you in your barns (*asamecha*), and in all that you put your hand to..." (verse 8) Here, the word *asamecha*, meaning barns, refers to the storehouses of grains where farmers store their crops. Yet, the Sages, using a play on words, offer an interesting piece of advice: "Said Rabbi Yitzchak: Blessing can only be found in that which is hidden from the eye (*hasmuy*—similar to the word *asamecha*), as it is written "Adonai will command the blessing with you in your barns...." (Baba Metzia 42a) In other words, the Sages taught that we shouldn't count our blessings. Rather, we should accept them with grace without looking to see how great they are.

Today, in light of an incredible advance recently announced by an Israeli company, the allusion to "hidden" blessings in our grain stores takes on an additional new and exciting meaning. According to the [Times of Israel](#), Israeli biotech startup NRGene, in collaboration with Tel Aviv University's Institute for Cereal Crop Improvement, successfully mapped the genome of wild Emmer wheat in less than a year, beating a European consortium which had spent over \$50 million over the past fifteen years trying to complete the project. As the global population grows, it requires more nutritious food in greater quantities. This becomes an ever-greater challenge as the world "loses" arable land to the effects of pollution, desertification, and other man-made and natural causes. Mapping genomes for plants allows scientists to see what makes them "tick" and the attributes they contain which allow them to thrive in specific environments. With NRGene's success, "farmers will be able to breed crops that can stand up to arid surroundings, brackish water, and other harsh environmental conditions in as little as three years, said Guy Kol, NRGene's founder and vice president of research and development.

Moses foretold of a time of "hidden blessing," when the people of Israel would enjoy great blessings in their storehouses of grain. Today, Israel's biotech advances have unlocked the hidden blessing stored in the DNA of wheat, which offers the promise of greater crop yields and food supply for all of mankind. ■