

IS RITUAL REALLY IRRELEVANT?

By Rabbi Moshe ben Asher, Ph.D. & Magidah Khulda bat Sarah

Have you ever picked up a Chumash (Pentateuch—Five Books of Moses), read a few lines, and then wondered to yourself: What *is* this about?

In the Torah reading Re'eh, we encounter the priests' recitation of blessings and curses heard by the whole people on Mount Gerizim and Mount Eval respectively. The entire people, unified in a national ritual but divided into groups of tribes, had climbed the two mountains to hear blessings and curses delivered by the priests in the valley below. (Deuteronomy 11:29-30)

It's easy to understand how the modern mind might take such a story as confirmation of the Torah's irrelevance to our life in the 58th century of the Jewish calendar, here and now. But there is a contemporary connection, not only to what's happening in our families and communities, but also to developments throughout the country.

When we hear about corporate and government nonfeasance and malfeasance, media irresponsibility and pandering to private interests, and military misbehavior, we want to fix blame.

At the least we're discouraged and dismayed by the moral and ethical lapses that in recent years seem to have become the hallmark of our culture, a culture that's dedicated to our acquisition of physique, position, prestige, power, and possessions, in contrast to fostering spirituality, family, community, productivity, and democracy.

At the worst, those of us who have lost a sense of sanctity, spirituality, safety or security are often discouraged or depressed, or even despairing and angry when we allow ourselves to think about what's happening.

The persistent question: Who or what is to blame for what's happening? And certainly more important, what can we do to help avoid it in the future?

Some might say that these questions are misguided, because the troubling conditions aren't a *Jewish* problem—but are they? We suggest that in two important respects they certainly are a Jewish problem.

They affect Jews. And any problem that affects Jews is a Jewish problem, one that Jews, individually and communally, may justifiably decide to address. They are also a Jewish problem because as Jews we are in a position to affect the

problem. What we do, what we teach and model in our individual and communal life, can have a positive effect on the problem. Moreover, our tradition teaches that, under such circumstances, we're obligated to remove a stumbling block from before the blind. (Leviticus 19:14)

It's increasingly apparent that some significant proportion—albeit certainly no more than a minority—of government, corporate, media, and military officialdom have been corrupted.

Most of us wouldn't have the chutzpah for some of their shenanigans, even if we had the opportunity and didn't have moral and ethical compunctions. Part of the explanation relates to wrongdoing that's done in *secret*.

It's easier to imagine one will be successful as a criminal if one's crime is embezzlement rather than daylight bank robbery, if one's crime is covertly giving contributors control of public policy, if one's crime is looking the other way when those under one's command are out of control, and so on.

It's probably fair to assume that what the corrupt do, they intend to do in secret, believing as they do:

- That their immoral or unethical behavior will never see the light of day—no one except their co-conspirators will ever know about it;
- That their public personas as successful leaders will never be sullied by discovery of their immorality;
- That they will never have to explain to their loved ones, particularly their children, why they are being pilloried in the press or publicly accused and in some cases charged and convicted of crimes that destroyed other people's lives; and
- That they will never be held publicly accountable for the potential and actual harm that they and their ilk are causing to their institution and the nation.

It's generally true that we engage in wrongdoing with the mindset that we won't be caught. And that mindset is reinforced if we aim to act in secret. Under such circumstances, we're inclined to believe that the benefits of our acts will singularly accrue to us as individuals. And, similarly, we're likely to imagine that discovery will only bring about the loss of what our wrongdoing has gained us personally.

We conclude that the lure of secret wrongdoing is particularly tempting, so our efforts to discourage it must be very well conceived and executed if they're to be effective.

Which brings us back to the question, how can we help to lessen secret wrongdoing in the future?

In *parsha* Re'eh, Moses tells the people that when Adonai brings them into the land, the blessing and curse that he set before them as a choice, they in turn are to set on Mount Gerizim and Mount Eval respectively.

According to the rabbis, the 12 subjects of the blessings and curses had one characteristic in common: they were the kinds of wrongdoing that could be done in secret. Sforno (Rabbi Ovadia ben Yaakov, 1470-1550), one of our best-known traditional commentators, went further to say that these particular forms of wrongdoing are typically the work of powerful and influential people, those who are often beyond the reach of the law.

What kinds of wrongdoing?

Parasha Ki Tavo enumerates a number of examples (Deuteronomy 27:15-26):

- We are not to worship idols in secret—such as disproportionately expending our time, energy, and spirit on material possessions—while publicly affecting a pious spiritual and religious demeanor.
- We are not to dishonor our parents by doing secretly what we would not do openly before them, except with shame—which presumably includes financially ruining the lives of thousands of people—while claiming to be a public benefactor.
- We are not to secretly move a neighbor's landmark or, for that matter, do anything secretly and unjustly that deprives a neighbor of what is rightfully his or hers—such as covertly favoring private developers who profit by destroying the environment, which amounts to an unjustifiable taking of a neighbor's property—while rationalizing our behavior as upholding individual property rights.
- We are not to place a stumbling block before the blind, which of course refers to more than a physical hindrance in front of someone who literally cannot see—such as placing young people in positions of substantial responsibility, say guarding prisoners of war, without properly training and supervising them—while demurring that our intention is entirely otherwise.
- We are not to pervert justice for the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow—which doubtlessly includes not corrupting the government

to the detriment of thousands of the less powerful through buying political influence that enables us to carry on self-serving wrongdoing at their expense—while pointing proudly to our own modest charitable contributions.

What is crucial about these curses is that they were not ascribed to the people at large but rather to the leaders of the people. And since all Israel is responsible for one another, the people were commanded to deal with the causes so long as they had the power to protest and, ultimately, to deal with the consequences if they failed to protest. Even in ancient Israel, then, which was certainly not anything like our modern democracy, the people were responsible for the conduct of their leaders.

What is the Torah's purpose in ordering the recitation of these blessings and curses on Mount Gerizim and Mount Eval?

What is described here is a powerful ritual that was designed to engage the minds, emotions, and spirits of the whole people, and whose effect was to be long-lasting.

Here's how it worked: A valley separates the two mountains. Mount Gerizim is lush with vegetation and shade trees, and well watered—inviting. Mount Eval, on the other hand, is dry and barren—f forbidding. The tribes were divided, half the people climbing Gerizim and half climbing Eval. In the valley below the priests called out the blessings and curses, to which the people replied “Amen” in response.

The penetrating lesson, then and now, is that each individual begins, in effect, from the same valley, with the same Torah as a guide and with the same free will. We learn that the blessing and curse are not what *befall* us—that we're not passive recipients of blessings and curses. We may choose to climb Gerizim with all its beauty or we may choose to climb Eval with all its ugliness.

So the whole people are engaged in a symbolic *ritual*, one designed to remain in their consciousness long after its conclusion, as an inescapable reminder of the consequences of secret wrongdoing.

So now we get to the heart of the matter—*ritual!*

For the most part, ritual has become the flotsam of modern religion—discarded as mindless, if not dangerous or actually destructive. The modern mentality is to separate moral and ethical behavior from ritual, the former said to be essential and the latter to be useless and enervating. But what this Torah reading comes to teach us is that there is an intimate connection between ritual practice and ethical and moral behavior.

Ritual, as we can see here, considered sociologically, is the investment of time, energy, resources, and spirit that we make to *symbolically communicate with ourselves* about what we value, and to reinforce our behavior that upholds and protects what we value.

Whenever we find ourselves engaged in ritual mindlessly, or hear someone telling us that ritual is mindless and a waste of time, instead of condemning the ritual as mindless we should end our own mindlessness by educating ourselves to its meaning and purpose—in effect, what it has to teach us and reinforce for us.

The consequences of secret wrongdoing, as we know, go far beyond the individual, as must the remedies and preventive measures. It is not enough for us individually to educate our children and ourselves as to moral and ethical behavior. We must create a community in which living out such moral and ethical behavior becomes other than the demoralized efforts of sole practitioners.

Every congregation has the choice to be either a social club with religious interests or a *kahal poalei tzedek*, a *community of doers of righteousness and justice*. As a *kahal poalei tzedek*, we must of

course be acting together in community for the sake of *tikun olam*, to repair the world—acting as one in practical ways to increase righteousness, truth, and justice, freedom, peace, and kindness in the world—and thus in the life of each one of us individually.

Rabbi Bachya ben Asher (1255-1340) taught in the late Middle Ages that, “David’s demand to be *poeil tzedek*, ‘doing righteousness,’ means he must not rob or steal anything belonging to his fellow.”

But more than that, more than simply refraining as individuals from what is forbidden, when we’re together in sacred space and time—on Shabbat, the Festivals of Shalosh Regalim, and the holy days of Yomim Nora’im (Days of Awe)—we must be enacting rituals that allow us to celebrate the Torah vision and path that move us to be a *kahal poalei tzedek* and that strengthen us to continue in that role in the face of adversity and our own weakness and temptation to avoid it.

And to do *that*, we must educate our children and ourselves to the meaning and practical value of those rituals, to expose as mistaken and misguided the idea that ritual is really irrelevant.

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