

“The Parsha Discussion” by Rabbi Alex Israel

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Ki Tavo. Am I a Hypocrite?

Please discuss:

- What do you think of hypocrisy? OK. Hypocrisy has a negative connotation, but is it legitimate to have different ethical or religious standards at work and at home, in a communal setting and in private?
- Why do many people find hypocrisy particularly offensive? What is a “double-standard” perceived as dishonest?
- One might say that we ALL have a double-standard; many of us act in a slightly different manner when we are away from the view of others. Is this reasonable or unreasonable?



Our parsha instructs Israel to convene a national gathering, a covenantal ceremony, at the mountains of Eval and Gerizim. There, along with the blessings of national flourishing if God’s law is kept and the threat of national ruin if we abandon God’s law, twelve pronouncements - twelve “curses” – are announced. The choice of topics in the list of the twelve is intriguing. They range from idolatry to incest, bribery to assault, parental affront to misleading the blind. Are these twelve sins of particularly severity? Why are these crimes singled out?

Looking at the list (Deut 27:15-26), one specific word jumps out. It is the word, “*ba-seter*” meaning “in private” or “in secret”. Twice this phrase comes up:

"Cursed be anyone who makes a sculptured or molten image, abhorred by God ... and sets it up in secret.... Cursed be he who strikes down a fellow man in secret..." (v.15,24)

This notion of sins performed "*Ba-seter* - in secret" is rather intriguing. After all, idolatry is a capital offence whether in public or in private. Similarly, you cannot attack another person no matter where you are. Does it matter whether it takes place in broad daylight or behind closed doors? But of course, these are people who do things in private, and then pass themselves off as upstanding citizens in public. That is why we need God to curse the offender; because we will never know! When we read the list of the twelve curses of he who “moves his fellow’s landmark ...misdirects a blind person ...subverts the rights of an alien, fatherless or widow ...he who lays with his sister ... who takes bribes”, these are all “private” in that they are behaviours that are unlikely to be publicised or to come to the attention of associates and friends.

“... it is sins which as a rule escape the attention of the human courts, which are here placed under the Rule of God-dispensation of ‘blessing’ and ‘curse’....

...All blessing is denied to him who outwardly plays the pious man devoted to God, but in secret denies the exclusive existence of One God and His Rule; who outwardly is respectful

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to his parents but inwardly considers himself vastly superior to them (v.16), who in the eyes of men preserves the reputation of an honest man but where unobserved does not hesitate to injure the rights of his neighbour to his own advantage (v.17), who is full of enthusiasm for the welfare of his neighbours in the presence of clever and intelligent people, but pushes short-sighted and blind people into misfortune (v.18); who grovels before the powerful, but denies the weak and helpless their rights (19); pretends to be a respectful member of society, to wallow in sexual licentiousness in his intimate privacy (20) ...” (R. Samson Raphael Hirsch)

Our private lives are under scrutiny no less than our public conduct. Furthermore, this passage asks us to examine our personal behaviour “in private”, and stimulates us to ask the uncomfortable question as to whether we are putting on a façade, presenting ourselves in public as having more integrity than we really have. And further still it challenges us by stating that if our Jewish communal life is hypocritical, where people act religious in public, but fail to uphold their religion when they are in private or away from the communal eye, it is a failure. We are a Jew in every area of our lives, and not just in the public domain. As we say in the Yom Kippur liturgy:

“You probe all the innermost chambers and test the thoughts and emotions. Nothing is hidden from You and nothing is concealed from Your sight.”

Shabbat Shalom!