

Secret Crimes

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The season of teshuvah and of moral improvement has arrived. A honest moral accounting helps us identify the sins we hope to repair and the character flaws we hope to overcome. A comprehensive personal inventory though, must address, not only specific actions, but overall behavioral trends. Which situations bring out our better selves and which situations bring out the worst in us. One aspect to consider is how we behave in a world which affords us greater anonymity.

Reenacting Sinai

The Torah was delivered upon a barren mountain, situated in a sterile desert. As Hashem's word lies beyond time and space it descended to this world beyond the realm of human civilization. Once we entered Israel though, it became necessary to restage the Sinai experience. Without embracing Hashem's word our license to this land is nullified.

Soon after we entered the land, the delivery of Torah was recreated upon two mountains in Northern Israel, in current day Samaria. Several fundamental commandments were reformulated, including many of those already engraved on the tablets. This list includes injunctions against idolatry, warnings against moral crimes and a lengthy list of sexual prohibitions.

Alongside these familiar prohibitions, we also received a brand new warning. We were cautioned not to harm others through acts committed in secret.

Years earlier, at Sinai there was no mention of "secret" crimes, and for good reason. During our tiring desert journey, we didn't enjoy any

private or personal space. The entire population of three and a half million was crammed into a relatively tight radius. Life outside the Jewish encampment was unsafe, and no one dared venture beyond the perimeter and beyond the protection of divine clouds. The prospect of a sin committed in secret or in private was unrealistic and no specific warning was required.

Entering Israel however, and building private homesteads presented a new danger of clandestine sins against others, and this new threat demanded an entirely new warning.

Public opinion serves as a powerful deterrent against immoral behavior. Concern about preserving our reputation and sensitivity to prevailing social codes both disincentivize unethical behavior. Actions taken outside of the public eye, however, are always less restrained and, often, are more dishonest and manipulative. When we are faceless, we are often shameless. When identity is hidden, we aren't answerable for our actions, and our conduct slides. For this reason, at the Israeli reenactment of Sinai, we were specifically warned about inflicting harm upon others through concealed behavior.

Halloween study

A famous social experiment known as the Halloween study, conducted in 1976, convincingly demonstrated the effects of social accountability. As part of the study, some children were asked general identification questions such as where they lived, or questions about their family, while other children remained completely anonymous. Both sets of children were offered candy, and their behavior was monitored by out-of-sight observers. Even though they weren't aware they were being watched, the children acted differently. Those who had identified themselves were more restrained in taking candy, whereas those who had remained anonymous were less inhibited. Mere knowledge that

our identity is transparent provides social accountability and encourages self-regulated behavior. Concealed identity, on the other hand, affords us a shroud of anonymity under which our behavior is less restrained.

The Modern Cloak of Anonymity

The internet has provided us all with a cloak of anonymity, enabling our personal expression without disclosing our individual identity.

Admittedly, this invisibility has provided various benefits, such as allowing us to voice unpopular opinions and empowering us to be critical of governments without the fear of retaliation.

However, the cloak of anonymity which the internet offers is eroding healthy communication. Freed of any social accountability, we ignore or even flout the norms of civility which should govern and moderate human interaction. Conversation on the internet often degenerates into aggression, anger, bigotry, shaming, and bullying. Comments and talkbacks are often radicalized, and people are vilified for their opinions. Of course, as to be expected, all this verbal chaos ends in antisemitism.

Whereas we used to cancel checks or appointments, today we cancel people, and we stifle their voices. Ironically, freedom of expression has led to the oppressiveness of "cancel culture". Beware the tyrannies which misused freedom always imposes.

Finally, anonymity encourages cowardly aggression. It isn't incidental that the infamous hacking group, which assaults organizations and countries which they believe to be criminal, is called "Anonymous:". It is too easy to attack others without announcing your identity or intent. The internet has provided a cloak for cowards.

Inevitably, our discourteous internet conversation bleeds into our daily life and infects our overall communication style. What happens on the

internet quickly influences what happens in real time. Our world is angrier and more rude, in part, because of the way we speak to one another on the internet.

Additionally, the rapid pace of internet communication encourages us to respond hastily, as we impetuously say and write things we later regret and are often forced to retract. Hurried internet communication conditions us to speak recklessly, without properly filtering our thoughts before they reach our lips.

The Torah warns us against harming others through secret crimes. The realm of secret crimes and the scope of these crimes have each expanded in the modern world. Comprehensive religious self-examination demands that we consider how we have communicated on various internet platforms.

Hypocrisy

Sins committed in secret also invite hypocritical behavior. When we sin in secret, we open a gap between our public persona and our real self, making claim to moral or religious standards which we don't actually adhere to. When personal behavior deviates too sharply from public impression, we become walking deceptions. Sometimes our hypocrisy is calculated and other times it is unwitting, but either way, we mislead others about our virtue and we gather unfair reputational benefits.

Aside from the deception of others, hypocritical behavior also makes us inauthentic as we constantly pursue two different lives – our real persona and our public masks. Sins performed in secret aren't just harmful to others but toxic to a life of authenticity.

Accepting Ourselves

Though we crave authenticity and abhor hypocrisy, we must not judge ourselves *too* harshly. It is virtually impossible to completely live by our

own moral code and to completely sync our inner lives with the values we cherish. Ultimately, social acceptance and personal reputation are powerful motivators of religious behavior, and there will always be a gap between our public and private selves. As long as that gap isn't too large, and as long as we don't intentionally manipulate people or falsely engineer our reputation, we must accept the limits of human nature and the inescapable built-in duplicity. Everyone lives with a gap between professed moral standards and personal conduct. Gaps are acceptable, canyons are not.

The Talmud relates the death-bed scene of the great teacher, Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakai. In his final religious guidance to his students, he asked that their fear of Heaven equal their fear of social opinion. His shocked students protested that fear of Heaven should exceed concern for social reputation. With wisdom accrued over a lifetime he responded "halevai". If only they acted in private in the presence of G-d *at least* as piously as they presented themselves in public. Recognizing human Nature, this wise man urged his students to sync their private lives with their public behavior. He probably understood that they would never fully succeed, but he encouraged them to try.

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