

Do We Ever Really Get Away With It?

by Rabbi Todd A. Markley

The story is told of a rabbi who, on this holy day of Yom Kippur, noticed that he had some free time on his calendar between the morning and afternoon prayers. It was a beautiful day, and the rabbi was moved to see if he could squeeze in a quick nine holes of golf between services. He so loved the game, and even though it would mean sneaking away, driving to the course, and paying for a tee time - all traditionally-forbidden activities on this Sabbath of Sabbaths – he decided the potential reward outweighed the bad.

When he arrived at the course and began his secretive solo round, the angels on high noticed and surrounded God with great concern... “Can you believe this? A Jew – a RABBI no less – engaged in idle play on this holiest of holy days! He’s violating so many commandments!”

“Not to worry,” God replied. I’ll teach him a lesson. On the rabbi’s next tee shot, God guided the ball in a perfect ark, and the rabbi watched in temporarily joyful amazement as the ball dropped directly into the hole.

“What kind of a lesson was that?” an exasperated angel inquired of God. “You blessed him with a hole in one!”

“Ah yes,” God replied, looking on as the smile faded quickly from the rabbi’s face. “But who is he going to tell about it?”

The story raises some interesting questions...among them: “How on earth does their congregation have that much time between morning and afternoon services?” and “Why don’t we get to see this side of God’s sense of humor more often, because that was FUNNY!” On the eve of Yom Kippur, however, I’d like to explore this question: **“What made the golfing rabbi think he could get away with it?”** What makes all of us think that **we** can get away with it when the inclination arises to do something we know we ought not do?

Oftentimes, it is the lack of watchful eyes around to catch us in the unsavory act that allows us to move from inappropriate thought to immoral action. And, it would seem, this has been an ongoing problem for humanity since Biblical times.

The Book of Deuteronomy tells us about a ritual the Israelites were to undertake once they safely arrived in the Promised Land. The priests were to gather all the people together, and loudly proclaim that the Israelites will be cursed if they perform any of a dozen different actions.¹ Why twelve? Because there were twelve tribes – representing the totality of the people – and, thereby, implying that we are – one and all - prone to committing these particular misdeeds.

¹ Deuteronomy 27

And what do these dozen curse-inducing sins have in common? For Torah commentator, Ibn Ezra, the pattern is clear...these are all sins that can be committed in secret.²

For example, “Cursed be the one who moves a neighbor’s landmark.”³ Why? Because moving your neighbor’s property boundary marker – likely in order to increase your own holdings at the neighbor’s expense – is something one does in secret...when all the neighbors are sleeping or off at work. And there was not necessarily any way for the neighbor to know he’d been wronged...Ancient gaslighting.

Or...“Cursed be the one who insults their parents.”⁴ Why? Because such disrespect typically happens within the privacy of the family home, out of view of those who might object to it.

“Cursed be the one who misdirects a blind person on their travels,”⁵ because the poor soul who has been victimized is unable to identify the person who led them astray and, therefore, that person cannot be held to account.

Our Sages expanded this particular prohibition to include the misdirection of anyone who is metaphorically blind to the circumstances around them⁶...like identity-thieves who prey on their victims by impersonating trusted institutions, or a financial advisor who leads newbie investors into risky positions against their long-term interests for his own personal gain. Which leads to the next on the list:

“Cursed be the one who undermines the rights of the stranger, the orphan, and the widow.”⁷ Why might one be tempted to take advantage of a new immigrant, a parentless child, or an aging widow? Because those groups lack standing in the community so their cries and legitimate grievances will likely go unheard when others take advantage of them. These souls often have little or no societal power, and – as such – the perpetrator is unlikely to be held responsible for mistreating them or depriving them of their fundamental rights. For examples of this kind of curse-worthy behavior, I invite you to read most any reputable news source on any day, ever.

And, if we are honest with ourselves on this holy day of Yom Kippur...when we are each invited to take a true accounting of our own souls, we have to admit, we have our own modern-day versions of these. Like the ancient person who moved his neighbor’s property marker back a few yards while nobody was looking, we are a little more likely to take an excessive share of Halloween candy, to text while driving, or to cheat on a test when there are no eyes to witness it. Likewise, we are a little less likely to return our

² Ibn Ezra on Deuteronomy 27:15

³ Deuteronomy 27:17

⁴ Deuteronomy 27:16

⁵ Deuteronomy 27:18

⁶ Rashi on Deuteronomy 27:18:1

⁷ Deuteronomy 27:19

shopping cart to its proper place, recycle our soda can, or pick up after our dog when there's nobody around to observe our transgression.

Or, in some cases, there can be plenty of people to witness our bad behavior, but we still don't care. Let's take our habits behind the wheel, for example, shall we? What's the difference between cutting to the front of a 50-person deep bathroom line at the ballpark and being the guy who intentionally speeds past the long line of cars waiting to get off the exit only to jam his car in at the last possible moment?

Well, at the ballpark, children and adults alike would rightly yell, "Hey, what's wrong with you?" and urge that guy back to his spot at the end of the line! But in our cars – our own private metal-encased autonomous automobiles – that guy knows that the worst the other drivers can do is honk on their horns, make lude gestures he can't see, and shout obscenities he can't hear. In other words...nobody's going to look that person in the eye and hold him directly accountable for his bad behavior, except – we hope and pray – for that police officer up ahead.

Like one who misdirected the blind in ancient days, today we use our words to mislead others, to trick them into thinking that one reality is true when, in fact, it is not. Like one who would curse the deaf, we speak ill of others behind their backs, tearing them down when they are not present to speak up for themselves all while selfishly obscuring the identity of the one assaulting their reputation.

Like the ancient insulters-of-parents who sinned in the seclusion of their homes, we too give way to our base inclinations when we're in private. For who will know whether or not we treat our family members with kindness and respect? No one can tell whether we are doing our part to support worthy causes from behind our closed doors. And when we hop online – for the **seven hours a day** the average American spends online⁸ – we are all-too-often emboldened to speak to and about people in ways that we would never to their faces. And – when we use the internet to hide our identities altogether – human beings can be transformed into real-life trolls.

I must pause here to note that the Jewish people is not immune from the worst kinds of abuses that take place behind closed doors, out of sight from those who might judge or prevent such deeds. Several of the dozen acts that draw curse upon a person in Deuteronomy are of this sort. Like those who would take advantage of a stranger, widow, or orphan, these situations typically involve a significant power imbalance that is being exploited, and for this, God will not stand, and we ought not either.

I know that there are those among us this evening whose theology – whose personal relationship with God – includes a sense that someone – something – out there knows what we're up to, and cares. These souls are living out the Rabbinic teaching from the *Mishnah*: "Remember these three things, and you'll stay out of trouble...know that there is above you an eye that sees, an ear that hears, and **all your deeds are written in a**

⁸ <https://www.allconnect.com/blog/data-report-how-americans-use-the-internet#:~:text=85%25%20of%20Americans%20use%20the,minutes%20of%20screen%20time%20daily>.

book.⁹ Here we are on Yom Kippur asking that God write and seal us into the Book of Life so that we can have one more crack at living lives filled with blessing and not curse...even though, we fear, we might not fully deserve it.

Or, perhaps your theology does not include a God that knows – or cares – what you’re up to. For you, I recall the social science study conducted in a cafeteria with the goal of determining what motivated patrons to clean up their mess when finished with their meals.

One experiment replaced all the generic posters of flowers that adorned the walls of the cafeteria with posters of human eyes. Fun fact: “The researchers found that during periods when the posters of eyes, instead of flowers, overlooked the diners, twice as many people cleaned up after themselves.”¹⁰ Please don’t hang posters of eyes in your homes to get your kids to clear their dishes. So creepy.

Elf on the shelf is not my thing, but if you like that idea in December, then do it for real. Get a picture of the face of someone whose moral compass and ethical behavior you respect, hang it in a few rooms of your house, and see if you take a few more steps towards being your best self this year. Maybe that person is a family member, and there are already pictures of them hanging all over your house. You’re halfway done! If so, be sure to – every once in a while – take the time to look at them when you’re passing by, and more importantly, **let them look at you.**

And if the watchful eyes don’t work for you, then perhaps just heed Thomas Jefferson’s advice: “Whenever you do a thing, act as if all the world were watching.”

And maybe, for you, there is no Higher Power, no external being, no watchful eye over our world. Maybe you don’t have a grandparent, parent, teacher, counselor, coach, or mentor whose face you conjure in your mind, and ask “What would this person do in this situation?” Beyond those potential motivators, we all rely upon inner conscience...that quiet voice within guiding us to do what’s right, that nagging churning in our stomachs when we know what we’re doing is wrong.

And, sometimes, we all find ourselves in a moment of wanting to ignore that still small voice in our heads and stop the stomach churning all at once by reminding ourselves that...we can get away with it. It’s not the right thing, but nobody’s going to know. My actions don’t matter.

But...they do...even if to no one else...they matter to you.

Rabbi Moshe Taragin writes: “[Our s]ins committed in secret...invite hypocritical behavior. When we [misbehave] in secret, we open a gap between our public persona and our real self, making claims to moral...standards to which we don’t actually adhere.

⁹ Mishnah Avot 2:1

¹⁰ <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/how-the-illusion-of-being-observed-can-make-you-better-person/>

When personal behavior deviates too sharply from public impression, we become walking deceptions... [increasingly] inauthentic as we constantly pursue two different lives – our real persona and our public masks. [Damaging acts] performed in secret aren't just harmful to others but toxic to a life of authenticity.”¹¹

It is noteworthy that the very first of the twelve behaviors that invited curse upon us in ancient Israel – and the one which was said to have been more damaging than all the others combined¹² – was the sin of idolatry. Perhaps that was the case because idolatry was always #1 on our jealous God's no-no list. Or maybe that one appeared first because – in the ancient Israelite mindset – God was the source of our moral mandates and ethical expectations, so once someone strayed into idolatry, the rest of these no longer had any bearing or meaning.

I appreciate Rabbi David Wolpe's explanation. “Part of the sin of idolatry is not believing in the reality of the intangible,” he writes. In other words, we are drawn to idols we can see and touch because we are uncomfortable with a God that we can't. However, we can't touch or see love, yet few question its existence. We cannot view the human soul, but we often speak of its capacity to outlast our physical form. Similarly, just because we think our sins are private – and thus invisible to others – does not mean they don't exist.

Rabbi Wolpe continues: “That which you think of as secret and therefore hidden is also real and has effects on one's character. *Teshuva* [repentance] means returning to the highest in us, and enabling our visible actions to be a reflection of the reality we cannot see.”¹³ To be - as God invited Abraham and all of his descendants to be – living blessings in our world.

Deuteronomy describes the dramatic scene as the priests proclaimed these private sins to be avoided, and the Israelites – then just as today – were active participants in the day's ritual. The Torah tells us that the Levites would proclaim in a loud voice, for example, “Cursed be the one who moves his neighbor's boundary marker,” and all the People Israel would say, “Amen!” in response.

As we enter this day of Yom Kippur and this new year of 5784, in the spirit of choosing blessing over curse, I do proclaim:

Blessed be the one who strives to do what is right in the public domain, and the private alike! **(AMEN!)**

Blessed be the one who takes the hand of the blind and helps them towards their goals!
(AMEN!)

¹¹ [Crimes Committed in Secret](https://jewishlink.news/crimes-committed-in-secret/) by Moshe Taragin in <https://jewishlink.news/crimes-committed-in-secret/>

¹² Rabbenu Bachya - Chullin 8

¹³ [Parashat Ki Tavo: Secrecy and character by Rabbi David Wolpe](#) 2021

Blessed be the one upholds and fights for the rights of the stranger, the widow, the orphan and all their modern-day contemporaries whose rights are trampled and freedoms denied! (AMEN!)

Blessed be the ones who remind us who we are striving to be and hold us to account! (AMEN!)

And blessed be the one who lives each day with the knowledge that their choices and actions matter profoundly whether anyone else knows of them or not. (AMEN!) Amen.