



THE PERSON

BY RABBI DR. TZVI HERSH WEINREB

OU Executive Vice President, Emeritus

IN THE PARSHA

Walls Have Ears

We all have our secret lives.

I don't mean to say that each of us has a sinister side, which we wickedly act out in some deep, dark, private world. What I do mean is that we all act differently when we are alone, or with a few close intimates, than we act when we are out in public, among others.

There is no one who is so behaviorally consistent that he is the same person in the privacy of his own home as he is in the workplace or marketplace.

Nor do I suggest that there is anything wrong with the fact that we each are two persons, and perhaps even multiple persons, depending upon the social context in which we find ourselves.

It is problematic, however, when we act hypocritically, presenting a pious and altruistic face to the world, while acting cruelly and crudely in our own homes and with our families.

In this week's Torah portion, *Parshat Ki Tavo*, there appears a particularly piercing and perceptive verse: "Cursed be he who strikes his fellow in secret—and all the people shall say, Amen."

In no way does the Torah imply that he who strikes his fellow in public is to be

blessed. Rather, the Torah recognizes the tendency humans have to reserve the worst side of themselves for their secret social settings, even when they behave meritoriously in their public social worlds. It is the façade, the contrast, between public demonstrations of righteousness and private acts of fiendishness that is cursed.

Sinning in secret is particularly offensive in the religious personality. He or she who believes in a God who is omniscient, and who yet sins in private, is guilty, not merely of hypocrisy, but of heresy. If God knows all, how can you delude yourself into thinking that your secret misdeeds can go undetected?

The *Shulchan Aruch*, the Jewish code of law, opens with a statement recognizing that a person's behavior, when he is alone at home, is very different from his behavior when he appears before a great king. And it urges the religious person to be aware that he is always in the presence of the great King of Kings, the all-knowing God.

But it is not only from a spiritual perspective that it is wrong to act demeaningly in private. There is a practical aspect as well to the importance of behaving properly even in secret. There always is the very real possibility that our secrets will be "leaked" and that things we were sure would never be known will become embarrassingly exposed.

I know of no place where this is conveyed more cogently than in these words of

caution, to be found in *Ecclesiastes* (10:20):

Don't revile a king, even in your intimate thoughts.

Don't revile a rich man, even in your bedchamber;

For a bird of the air may carry the utterance,

And a winged creature may report the word.

Indeed, as Rashi says (*Berachot* 8b), the walls have ears.

The passage in this week's Torah portion that condemns secret violence also gives quite a comprehensive catalog of other sins which tend to be performed behind closed doors. They include elder abuse, criminal business practices, deceiving blind persons, subverting the rights of the helpless, incest and bestiality, and the acceptance of bribery. Quite a list, and one that has certainly not lost its relevance over the centuries.

I am not so naïve as to think that we are required to act in an absolutely identical fashion in our "secret chambers" as we do out in the "real world." To a certain extent, it is necessary and right that we maintain a façade of sorts when we interact in public. We all have, and need, our masks and personas.

But many times, we go too far and indeed split our personalities between the Dr. Jekylls of our external visible behavior and the Mr. Hydes of our inner sancta. How well advised we would be to set as an objective for ourselves the words of the Daily Prayer Book:

"A person should always be God-fearing, privately and publicly, acknowledging the truth and speaking it in his heart." ■



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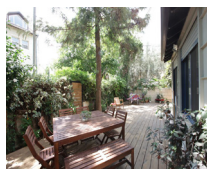
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