



THE PERSON IN THE PARSHA

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“Courtesy and Confidentiality”

“There is no such thing as privacy anymore.”

“There are no secrets anymore.”

These are two complaints that are heard frequently nowadays.

We live in a world of cell phones and e-mails, blogs, Facebook and Twitter. We have no privacy, for almost anyone can reach us wherever we are, whatever we happen to be doing, at all times of the day.

And we can have no secrets, because anyone who knows anything about us can spread it to the entire world in a matter of seconds.

How often have I sat down for a moment of private time, for study or contemplation, or just to “chill out”, only to have the silence disrupted by some total stranger who managed to obtain my cell phone number?

How many dozens of e-mails and blogs fill up the space of my inbox with communications that, at best, are of no interest to me and often are offensive and obnoxious?

We once felt entitled to privacy and courtesy, but they no longer seem achievable.

Often, we write a confidential note to a trusted friend, sharing a message that we would rather others not know, only to discover that the note is now circulating in cyberspace, accessible to literally everyone. Sometimes, it is the friend’s betrayal that has made our secret public. Often, it is simply misjudgment or carelessness on his part. But more

frequently, it is an unwanted error, a mistaken pressing of “send” instead of “delete.”

We once expected confidentiality and discretion, but they too no longer seem possible.

Our contemporary society has lost what once was among its primary values. “A man’s home is his castle” once meant that decent citizens respected the “fences” around another individual’s personal space and would not casually trespass those boundaries.

The value of trusting in the discretion of another, once a cornerstone of human interaction, is now in danger of being relegated, along with other once cherished values, to the oblivion of “old-fashionedness.”

The right to privacy and the ability to assume confidentiality are universal human values. It is important to know that they are primary Jewish values as well. Sources for these values in our tradition include this week’s Torah portion, *Parshat Vayikra*.

This might come as a surprise to you, dear reader, because you know that this week’s portion is the introduction to *Leviticus*, the biblical book which focuses upon sacrifices and Temple ritual. This week’s portion especially seems limited to the comprehensive and complex details of sacrificial offerings. Where is there even a hint of these contemporary concerns, courtesy and confidentiality?

The first two verses in the first chapter of *Vayikra* say it all, albeit between the lines:

“The Lord called to Moses and spoke to him from the Tent of Meeting, saying: ‘Speak to the Israelite people and say to them...’”

The rabbis of the Talmud saw in these simple and direct phrases two subtle messages.

First of all, the Lord called to Moses first and then spoke to him. He didn’t surprise Moses. He didn’t intrude on Moses’ privacy and autonomy. First, He called to him. He knocked on Moses door, as it were, ringing the bell first, asking to be invited in. No unwanted intrusion, even from the Lord Almighty, to his favorite prophet!

This observation is made by the rabbis in the Talmudic tractate of *Yoma*. In a less well-known Talmudic source, the tractate of *Derech Eretz*, the rabbis find that the Almighty’s courteous concern for the privacy of his lowly creatures did not begin with Moses. It goes back to the way He treated the very first man, Adam. Genesis chapter three, verse nine: “The Lord God called to Adam and said to him: ‘Where are you?’” Here too, even when the Lord wishes to rebuke Adam, He first “calls to him”, signaling the uncomfortable conversation which is about to ensue.

God respects Adam’s privacy, and He doesn’t just “barge in” on Moses. Surely a lesson in human values.

The rabbis on the same page in the tractate of *Yoma* find another message in the deceptively simple opening verses of our *parsha*. “... saying: ‘Speak to the people and say to them...’” From the redundancy here, “say,” and “speak,” and “say,” the rabbis derive the lesson that when someone tells you something, you are forbidden to share it with another unless you are given explicit permission to do so.

Moses was not permitted to re-tell even the divine message that he heard until God Himself told him that it was okay to “say it over”.

The medieval Rabbi Moses of Coucy actually enumerates this admonition for utter confidentiality as one of the prohibitions comprising the 613 commandments of the Torah.

As I have reflected upon these specific teachings over the years of my personal *parsha* study, I have come away with several conclusions:

Firstly, there is much that is implicit in the Torah; much that lies beneath the surface. The long and complicated ritual laws that confront us as we read this week’s *parsha* are contained in a context that teaches us more than the surface lessons. Our rabbis of old were particularly expert at digging out these unexpected but precious nuggets.

Secondly, these nuggets are often of astounding relevance for our contemporary condition. What can be more relevant than a reminder about the values of courtesy and confidentiality?

Finally, these lessons are not merely abstract teachings or bits of wisdom for us to ruminate upon as we relax in our armchairs. Rather, they are calls to arms. They are challenges.

It is difficult indeed to combat the value system that is foisted upon us by the technology which pervades the world in which we now live. Very difficult. But very necessary.

If we lazily submit to the pernicious influence of modern convenience, we risk the ultimate loss of our very humanity.

A culture devoid of courtesy can turn into a culture of callousness and cruelty.

A world where one cannot trust his confidante is a world where authentic friendship is impossible.

Troubling thoughts? Yes, indeed. But they are thoughts which we ignore at our own peril.

How fortunate are we that these thoughts are available to us, subtly embedded in the opening verses of this week’s Torah portion! ■