

**Seven Not Deadly—But Pretty Damaging Sins  
Part II**

**This morning we'll continue our series on  
seven maybe not deadly—but still pretty damaging sins.**

**Last night we looked at the sins of  
confusing our values,  
thinking without nuance and  
being stiff-necked.**

**This morning we'll look at four more  
with an eye towards recognizing them in ourselves and  
with the awareness that recognition brings, hopefully overcoming them,  
at least somewhat, in the new year.**

***“Al chet shechatanu lifanecha b'galui u'vasater.***

**For the sin we have sinned against you publicly or secretly.”**

**We'll walk down memory lane here.**

**Remember Col. Oliver North? Of Iran-Contra fame?**

**(Does he still have a TV show?)**

**Back in the day, when he was testifying before the Congressional committee  
that was more or less trying to get to the bottom of the scandal,  
he told how he once tried to destroy an incriminating email  
by pressing “delete.”**

**As everyone knows now, pressing delete doesn't really delete an email.**

**But this was the '80's. Who knew? Not him.**

**“I thought I was getting rid of it,” said Col. North. “Boy was I wrong.” Indeed.**

**Protecting malfeasance in high places is not the place for it  
but there is a legitimate place for secrecy.**

**In our personal lives, we all need it.**

**We need to grow. Which means we will make mistakes.**

**It is one of freedom's great blessings that  
we get to make at least some of them in private.**

**The totalitarian movements of the 20<sup>th</sup> century did everything they could  
to take people's personal privacy away. As far as they were concerned,  
the more people were in glass houses, the better,  
with secret informers, secret police and spies everywhere.**

**Milan Kundera, who lived under Communism in Czechoslovakia wrote,**

**“Life when one can't hide from the eyes of others -- that is hell. . . .**

**Without secrecy, nothing is possible -- not love, not friendship.”**

**To which we might add, not freedom of thought, not imagination,  
not the possibility of exploration and discovery—  
and not a whole lot more.**

We are all entitled to personal secrecy and privacy.  
Without it, we are less than fully human.

But there is another side to the coin.

Privacy can also be a cover for “the sins we have committed in secret.”

It can be a cover for what we would not do,  
often for very good reason, in public.

Public anonymity rarely brings out the best in us.

Look at the comments or “talkback” section in any online news column.

Actually, it’s better not to.

Under the veil of anonymity,

people are free to let their worst come out—and do they ever.

A phone app called “Secret” was launched last year.

Conceived as a place to share secrets, it was instantly overwhelmed  
by name calling, sniping, and all the rest.

They hired moderators to enforce civility but couldn’t hire enough.

The community self-destructed and

the app went from “next big thing” to out of business in 16 months.

Then there is Bitcoin, the online currency,  
which allows secret monetary transactions.

If drug dealers and money launderers aren’t using it for all it’s worth,  
they are a lot less savvy than I think they are.

For the sins we have committed in secret.

We can thank Edward Snowden for the knowledge

that there is basically no such thing as electronic privacy these days.

And I suppose we can thank the hackers who posted the names of everyone  
who registered at AshleyMadison.com for underscoring the point.

Today, when everyone carries a device that can send

your picture around the world in seconds,  
there’s not much privacy in public either.

I saw a sign at a local tourist shop:

“What happens in Vegas may stay in Vegas,  
but what happens in the Keys ends up on Facebook.”

I don’t know about the Keys and Facebook

but even before the new technology,

what happened in Vegas, did not stay in Vegas.

What happened in Vegas, or anywhere else,

became part of who we are.

The teaching of the High Holidays is that this is inescapable.

We are always seen and we are always accountable.

We shouldn’t kid ourselves.

Because we’re the only one we’ll be kidding.

*“Al chet shechatanu lifanecha b’galui u’vasater.*

For the sin we have sinned against you publicly or privately.”

*“Al chet shechatanu lifanecha b’imutz halev.*

For the sin we have sinned against you by hardening the heart.”

When we hear that phrase, Pharaoh probably comes to mind.  
 But there is some Pharaoh in each of us.  
 When people have power--any people, any power—  
 even if it is the power to turn aside,  
 it becomes all too easy to ignore the plight of those who have none.  
 This is not altogether a bad thing.  
 If we spend too much time and energy worrying about others,  
 there won't be enough left to take care of ourselves.  
 Maimonides taught that we are obligated to give *tzedaka* only to the point  
 where if we continued to give it, we would need it ourselves.  
 Since we can't fix all the world's problems, we have to draw the line.  
 The question is where?

This story is from 1938 or '39, before the war began in earnest in Europe.  
 A couple of Irishmen are sitting in a tavern in NYC and news comes  
 over the radio that the Gestapo has rounded up a group of nuns.  
 Hearing this, one of the patrons slams his fist on the bar and shouts,  
 "Now that S.O.B. has gone too far!"  
 Let's take a breath here. Now he's gone too far?!  
 Years after Dachau, years after the Nuremberg Laws,  
 months after Kristallnacht, now?!  
 We can only assume it was too far this time because this time  
 it was one of his, not one of ours, not one of somebody else's.  
 I suppose it is natural to care more when it is "our own."  
 We do care less when it is "someone else's."  
 But this can also be the sin of *imutz halev*—being hard hearted.  
 Maybe this year we can care a bit more  
 even when it is not, strictly speaking, our own.  
 Judaism, contrary to the way some people understand it,  
 is not supposed to be just about, Jews.  
 It is supposed to demonstrate how the world can work  
 when all of humanity follows the teachings of the Torah.  
 That's in the *Aleinu* prayer we say at every service.  
 We are supposed to be about all of God's children.  
 Which makes me proud of the efforts now being started across  
 major segments of the Jewish community to aid the Syrian refugees.  
 This is not easy for us. And it is less easy for the nations of Europe.  
 But for the refugees, it is not 1938. It is 1943.

Rabbi Hillel taught,  
 "If I am not for myself, who will be for me?  
 But if I am only for myself, what am I?"  
 The answer to the first question is no one.  
 The answer to the second is selfish.  
 We almost always find a way to do for ourselves.  
 When we find a way to also do for others,  
 it makes us a bit more human and a bit more holy.  
*Al chet shechatanu lifanecha b'imutz halev.*

For the sin we have sinned against you by hardening the heart.

**“Al chet shechatanu lifanecha b’einaim ramot.”**

Literally, “For the sin we have sinned against you with “elevated eyes.”

That is to say, for the sin of putting our heads in the sky,

for looking above or past others,

when we should be seeing them right in front of us.

It can also mean turning away from people’s suffering because, after all,

if they didn’t deserve it, they wouldn’t be suffering in the first place.

The Book of Job meant to put a stop to that argument some 2500 years ago,

where God himself refutes it as baseless.

Notwithstanding, it’s still a popular meme.

We’ve all heard it and many of us have thought it,

if not exactly, maybe kind of.

“What do you expect, they brought it on themselves.”

From rape victims (shouldn’t have dressed that way)

to homeowners in default (shouldn’t have borrowed so much)

to victims of natural disaster (why are they living there in the first place?)

to laid off professionals (should have performed better)

to underachieving students (should have studied more)

to the sick (should have taken better care of themselves)

to those in the chains of poverty (should just work harder).

It takes real *einaim ramot* to see things that way.

But people do see things that way.

Moreover, they will tell you they are right to do so.

That they are being guided by conscience, principle, morals, even religion.

Interestingly, studies have shown--there are many exceptions

but generally speaking--the more privileged and charmed your life is,

the less empathy you have for those whose lives

are less privileged and charmed than yours.

Again, it is not an absolute. But it is a thing.

I suppose it is understandable.

If you worked hard, played it straight and never failed to show  
unimpeachable moral character,

If you were smart enough to choose the right parents to be born to,

the right schools to go to,

the right country to be born in, at the right moment in history,

If you were clever enough to make sure you inherited

the right cultural DNA...

Why couldn’t they?? Okay, sarcasm off.

Yes we may have worked hard but let’s admit we were also lucky.

And we were able to survive mistakes that

those without our many advantages could not.

It is *einaim ramot* to pretend otherwise.

We do nothing for others when we judge them with elevated eyes.

We do much more, for them and ourselves, when we accept that

their lives are at least as challenging as ours. If not more.

According to Rabbi Harold Schulweis (d. 2014),  
 one of the reasons Judaism has as many laws as it does  
 is that the human mind has the ability to convince itself of just about anything,  
 especially its own rightness.

“Toward conscience, religion is ambivalent.

Conscience remains forever suspect...more is expected of religion.”

He is correct of course. To look at those who are suffering with compassion and empathy is the real religious response. If we can't manage that, best to keep quiet and leave the judging to God. It may take us off of our high moral horse but we don't need to be there in the first place. Most people want the same things we do—and would earn them given half the chance.

*“Al chet shechatanu lifanecha b'einain ramot.*

For the sin we have sinned against you with eyes that just don't see.”

*“Al chet shechatanu lifanecha b'hona'at re'a.*

For the sin we have committed against you by wronging others.”

Do we remember the Zimbardo experiment?

Thanks to a new movie about it, it was in the news again this summer.

For those who are a little hazy,

in 1971, Prof. Philip Zimbardo of Stanford University

designed an experiment to see how student volunteers would act

if they were assigned the roles of either inmate or guard in a simulated prison.

How they acted, in basically no time flat,

was that the “guards” became brutally abusive

and the “prisoners” were brutally abused.

Professor Zimbardo had to stop the experiment short

because people were starting to get hurt, some seriously so.

The Zimbardo experiment has been much taught and written about

in the last 44 years. For good reason.

It tells us something deeply uncomfortable about ourselves, namely,

given the opportunity to hold power over others,

we will start wronging them, and worse.

Note that these were Stanford students, not some neighborhood tough guys.

The movie is new but the story is old. From Andersonville to Majdanek to the Hanoi Hilton; from Abu Ghraib to Baltimore to Dannemora and many more we could name. Give people power over others and many of us will abuse it to the point where we become monsters.

Our country's Founding Fathers built Separation of Powers and Checks and Balances into the Constitution—to our blessing as a nation we would all agree. But where are our personal Checks and Balances? How do we keep ourselves from overdosing on power, which if it were a drug would be the most potent on earth?

The Jewish answer to that question, and it is a classic question, is the Torah. According to Deuteronomy, the King, the most powerful man in Israel, is commanded to keep a copy always beside him at his throne, in order that he may “study it day and night” and not wrong the people he is there to serve. (Deut. 17: 15-20)

The rest of us need the Torah no less than the king of Israel. Its boundaries restrain our lesser impulses—which if we needed proof Zimbardo gave it to us, are never far away.

So consider accepting this invitation for more Torah in the new year.

Pray with us on Friday night.

Learn with us on Shabbat morning.

Or, just pretend you are the King/Queen of Israel and study our code of life with its traditional commentaries on your own chair.

If it helps us avoid the sin of wronging even one other, it will have been worth it.

*“Al chet shechatanu lifanecha b’honaa’at re’ah.*

Between last night and this morning we have looked at seven not necessarily deadly, but nonetheless pretty damaging sins.

Confusing our values,  
thinking without nuance,  
being stiff-necked,  
doing wrong in secret,  
hardening the heart,  
looking past what we should see,  
abusing our power.

On Rosh Hashanah we spoke about making our lives more holy.

We are here today until sundown, fasting, learning and praying; attempting to do just that.

If we are moved to ask forgiveness of anyone we may have wronged that too is a holy act.

We will not finish this work today.

We will continue it throughout the year.

And I am sure, next year and the year after that as well.

This is what Jews do. And we are blessed to be on this path.

*V'al kulam elohai selichot, slach lanu, mchal lanu, kaper lanu.*

For all these sins O God of forgiveness, forgive us, pardon us and grant us atonement.

*G'mar tov and l'shana tovah.*