

Confronting Our “Concealed Things”

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The concealed things concern the Lord our God; but with overt matters, it is for us and our children ever to apply all the provisions of this Teaching. (Deut. 29:28)

Standard readings of this quite enigmatic verse from Parashat Nitzavim include these:

- Don't fret over the fact that we have no control over the sinful thoughts that are harbored by others, or even over the sinful acts committed by others in secret. We should just pay attention to the things others do in our vicinity over which we *do* have control, and work to right them.
- We are charged with dealing with evil that is done in our presence and is known to us, for “*areivim zeh la-zeh*” means not only that we are responsible for one another's *welfare*, but that we are also accountable for the *behavior* of other people in our community and society. Heschel famously wrote that “in a free society, few are guilty but all are responsible.” The concealed things belong to God. They are not your province. Stick to that which is done openly, and that therefore can be addressed and healed to the benefit of all.

There is, however, another reading of this verse, given by Nahmanides (Ramban), in the 13th century, and it is one that forces us to a certain deeper level of introspection at this time of year.

Here's a paraphrase of what he says:

The “concealed things” are not sins committed by *others* that are out of our view, and thus out of our control. Rather, they are the sins committed by *us*, but that are nevertheless

out of our view and awareness. As long as we are not aware of them, they will be known only to God. But they are only out of our control *because* they are not known to us.

Of what infractions are we speaking here? Much, for example, has been said in recent days in our society about “implicit prejudice.” One of the most direct and affecting articulations was given by President Obama, when he was first running for election in 2008. Circumstances involving his pastor impelled him to give a major address about race in this country. In that address, he made the following remarkable admission, when he described his white grandmother in these words:

“... a woman who helped raise me, a woman who sacrificed again and again for me, a woman who loves me as much as she loves anything in this world, but a woman who once confessed her fear of black men who passed by her on the street, and who on more than one occasion has uttered racial or ethnic stereotypes that made me cringe.”

How many of us are similarly willing to search out the kind of implicit prejudices that we cannot believe—or do not wish to believe—are living within us? Do we have the moral stamina to recognize the lazy stereotypes that keep us comfortable, but have real consequences for the people we stereotype? We identify someone as an ultra-Orthodox Jew by the way he or she dresses—which is fair enough—but then we may jump immediately, and almost unknowingly, to the easy assumption that this person is religiously coercive, isn't involved in gainful employment, is certainly not a fan of democracy, etc. etc. Never imagining that just maybe this person is one of the Haredi Jews, both here and in Israel,

who live their beliefs and let others live theirs, and whose progressive values lead them to promote secular education, women's rights, and the institutions of civil society. Our heads, and our experience, should tell us about such people (and they exist in some numbers), but the concealed things in the gut eclipse that common sense and tell us otherwise.

How many times have those of us who would criticize any attempt to lump every member of an ethnic group into one bloc nevertheless reflexively hesitated when seeing a keffiyeh or hijab? We don't want to believe it is there, but can we be sure without looking more closely? What about people whose bumper stickers or lawn posters reflect a political stance with which we disagree? How much implicit prejudice do we actually have? We assume others have it, of course, when they see *our* bumper stickers, but can we honestly seek out the traps that we silently and secretly fall into? Can we imagine that we also are prone to implicit racism, even as it seems so comfortably arms-length to suggest that it's the problem of law enforcement officers, who are, after all, at greater risk than we are when we form our judgments? Note that this is not meant to excuse implicit (and certainly not explicit) racism. It is simply to sensitize us to our tendency to say "it's them," never thinking it might be us as well.

And what effect might those imperceptibly unfair judgments have on those who are being judged? In interviews for jobs and schools; in the willingness of the circles with access to social privilege to include them; in our readiness to listen to their narratives as peers, and not as people with an alien agenda?

This is what I love about Ramban's reading of the concealed things that belong to God. It may look as if Ramban is exonerating us of these implicit prejudices, because the verse says that only God can be expected to know the secret things. But the paradoxical truth is that by telling us that (too often) only God knows the secret things, Ramban is reminding us that they are there to be known, and thus of

the grave and urgent fact that we all harbor hidden and secret things, things we would be ashamed to see. *They are God's only as long as they are hidden.* But now we are reminded that they are indubitably present, and it becomes our obligation to seek them out, to reveal them.

So the way to read the verse is this: "Those less than attractive traits and reflexes that we harbor and hide from ourselves are too often known only to God; but it is an ongoing obligation for us and our descendants to bring them to light, so that we will truly be able to live as the Torah hoped—and still hopes—that we learn to live."

The *mahzor* that will guide us through the upcoming Days of Awe will confront us with the Ramban's reading quite explicitly. On Yom Kippur we will ask for forgiveness for "the breach of all commandments and prohibitions, *whether known to us or not.*" A clear reminder that remaining unaware of things we can, by courageous effort, recognize in ourselves, requires forgiveness, atonement, and commitment to do better in the future. And this is hardly an insignificant thought to take with us into these upcoming days of introspection, as Jews and as Americans.