

Warnings

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

There's a very unusual ceremony in this week's part of the Torah. When the tribes cross over the river Jordan and settle on the West Bank they were commanded to gather on the two Mountains Gerizim and Eyval which can be found near the city now called Nablus. To this day, they are considered holy by the Samaritans. Their Temple was on Gerizim. This was because these mountains are actually mentioned in the Torah. Unlike Mount Zion which is only hinted at.

Ceremony consisted of tribes divided into two groups, six tribes on each mountain. The priests stood in the valley between with the Ark. And they turned to the group on Gerizim and proclaimed a blessing for those who did the right thing. And then they turned to Mount Eyval and proclaimed a curse for those who did not. And everyone answered "Amen." In this context, the curses and the blessings simply meant that one path would be positive and beneficial and the other would be negative and destructive.

The Torah gives a list of actions starting with "A person who makes an idol in secret" and on through a list of other forbidden acts, like adultery, theft, dishonesty and adultery that usually are done secretly rather than in the open.

One is bound to wonder why it wasn't enough just to bless those who keep the Torah in general and curse those who do not. Why focus specifically on actions that are secret, done in private?

We don't know if this event ever took place. There is no record. So as with many things in the Torah we are left to discover its significance and relevance to us now. But clearly the Torah is warning people in general against being deceitful and two faced if they wanted to establish an ethical and just society. And I believe, that in settling the new land they may end up far from the center and each other and lose what we now call peer group pressure to behave ethically.

I suggest that it is also brilliantly relevant. In this era of social media, we tell the world a lot about ourselves. We like to show everyone our good and the positive side. But we hide the secret and the negative. Some people don't seem to know the difference between private and public. And some have no sense of shame.

What the Torah tells is that what you do in private determines the person you really are. We can all put on a good public face. It is when no one is watching that we reveal who we really are. And this is then followed by a lengthy toheha, literally rebuke. But in fact, another long warning that really bad things will happen if we betray our ideals and our covenant with God.