

Hypocrites

We Jews have always been outliers. Now it seems everyone else wants to catch up with us and claim victimhood, discrimination, abuse, and alienation and the only way to cope is to be mean to everyone else. We are admired and despised, and we are our own worst enemies.

We are commanded to love each other, to be responsible for each other, and to be loyal to our traditions. And yet we are so divided and conflicted, religiously, socially, ethnically, and politically it is unbelievable. There is no way we can agree as a people, a nation, or individuals on almost any issue. And no one seems willing to give an inch. I am a complete anomaly, and I don't fit into any regular category. And some might think this is a fault, but I think it is fantastic. Even if I realize most people are just not as comfortable as I am being that way and need the reassurance of the group.

I dislike extremes and hypocrites, whether of the left or the right, secular or religious. As at this moment the religious wing of our people is on the ascendancy, although far from a majority yet, their failings hurt me more, because they matter to me, they reflect on me. So, I derive some comfort from realizing that two thousand years ago the rabbis already noticed this phenomenon of hypocrisy.

The volume of the Talmud that is being studied daily at the moment, *Sotah*, is preoccupied with betrayal and unfaithfulness. It discusses raw human nature and illustrates how many of us fall short of the Torah's ethical ideals. Here's an extract that illustrates what I am driving at.

"The Sages taught: There are seven pseudo-righteous people who erode the world, the *Shikmi*, the *Nikpi*, the *Kizai*, the *Medukia*, those who say tell me what my obligations are, and I will perform them, those who are righteous out of excessive love, and those who are righteous out of excessive fear" (*Sotah 22b*).

All of them are hypocritical in one way or another, betraying the ideals of the Torah. *Shikmi*, are like the men of Shechem who converted only for financial gain, and *Nikpi* are those dragging their feet on the ground in an attempt to appear humble and injuring themselves in the process (they sound like nitpickers). The *Kizai* are the bloodletting righteous who like to show how much they are suffering for the sake of religion, and the *Medukia* are so excessively strict that they squeeze all the pleasure of life out of themselves. Some are pious to show others how good they are, others out of fear. Each one looks down on the other and each one thinks he or she is superior and that they are fooling everyone else. The Aramaic 'nicknames' *Shikmi*, *Nikpi*, *Kizai*, and *Medukai* are the equivalent of such current words of abuse as " *flasher*, *shtarker*, *bragger*, *bluffer*, *phony*, or *jerk*".

In theory, you might think that such people ought to stop pretending, or exaggerating, and abandon the whole enterprise. But Rav Yehuda says in the

name of Rav, that a person should always engage in Torah study and performance of the mitzvot for their own sake, but if not they should still carry on even if for the wrong reasons, because eventually, they may come to perform them for the right reason (and the routines provide a framework for putting things right, in theory at least). Nevertheless, you can see why in some circles the name Pharisee became pejorative. Even if its main usage meant pious in a good sense, people have always put on fronts.

Of course, religious people are no more or less prone to hypocrisy than any other group of human beings. Indeed, one might say that homo sapiens might be defined as the only hypocritical animal!

So, given this universal tendency to try to impress others with how innocent, pious, or how right and upstanding people are while in practice doing far more damage than they realize, either by trying to force their views and standards on others or by simply being selfish, how or should one respond?

The Talmud much later on, toward the end of the folio, goes on to say this.

“In the time leading up to the arrival of the Messiah, impudence will increase, and high costs will pile up. Although the vine will produce grapes, the wine will be expensive. The authorities will be corrupt, and no one will rebuke them. to give reproof about this. The judiciary will be a place of promiscuity, settlements will be destroyed, and people will go from city to city to seek charity, but they will find no mercy. And the wisdom will putrefy, and people who do fear sin will be held in disgust, and the truth will be absent. The youth will shame their elders, elders will stand before minors. Normal family relations will be ruined, sons will disgrace fathers and daughters will rise against their mothers, a daughter-in-law against their mothers-in-law. A man’s enemies will control his household. The face of the generation will be like the face of a dog. A child will no longer be ashamed before his parents (*sounds very much like much of society today*). And upon what is there for us to rely? Only upon God in heaven” (*Sotah 49b Mishna /Gemara my translation*).

There’s a lot there that sounds like modern societies with their topsy-turvy value systems. Sometimes when reason fails, and compromise seems impossible one can only throw one’s hands up in the air and say admit “There are none so queer as folk.” We just don’t understand people and things may get so bad that all one can do is pray for a miracle, whether we expect a messiah to come and get us out of this mess, or some other miraculous event that will succeed in banging our heads together.

Sorry, bang the same drum again. I would love with all my heart to see peace. To see Jews happy, Palestinians happy, secularists, religious of all shades, getting along. I just can’t see it! So, if we try our best and we cannot succeed in changing others, at least we should take care of ourselves and those we can help and ensure we don’t fall into any of those categories above, *Shikmis, Nikpis, Kizais, or Medukais*. But in the meantime, as we always used to say in Israel *Yihyeyh Tov!* It will be OK, we will survive.