

# Should you Care What Others Think?

## Introduction

This week’s Torah portion is *Pekudei* -- “Accountings”. It is a detailed balance sheet. We learn exactly how Moses responsibly directed the use of every single item to build the Tabernacle:

All the gold that was used for the work, in all the work of the sanctuary -- the elevation offering of gold -- came to 29 talents and 730 shekels by the sanctuary weight. The silver of those of the community who were recorded came to 100 talents and 1,775 shekels by the sanctuary weight: a half-shekel a head, half a shekel by the sanctuary weight, for each one who was entered in the records, from the age of twenty years up, 603,550 men. The 100 talents of silver were to cast the sockets of the sanctuary and the sockets for the curtain, 100 sockets to the 100 talents, a talent a socket. [Ex. 38:24-27]

Moses wanted everything to be transparent, above-board and in the open, so as to be beyond suspicion. He was applying the Jewish principle of מְרִאית עֵין -- *Marit Ayin*, literally: “Appearance to the eye”.

*Marit Ayin* means that some permitted behavior is prohibited because it may appear to casual observers to be something prohibited. This would

- (1) Cause them to assume it is permitted, or, if they know it isn't,
- (2) Cause them to think ill of the one doing it.

One’s behavior should not only be beyond reproach, but beyond suspicion as well. The Mishnah says:

It is one’s duty to *seem* to be free of blame before others as before God. As the Torah says:

וְהִיִּיתֶם נְקִיִּים מִיהוָה וּמִיִּשְׂרָאֵל

And you shall be innocent before the Lord *and before Israel*. [Numbers 32:22]

and the Book of Proverbs says:

וּמִצָּדִיק וְשֶׁכֶל-טוֹב בְּעֵינֵי אֱלֹהִים וָאָדָם

And you will find favor and good understanding in the eyes of God *and of man*. [Proverbs 3:4].

[Shakalim 3:2]

Commentators have said it is far easier to fulfill the first half than the second. Obituaries in newspapers frequently say something like: “He found a cure for cancer but he was once convicted of jaywalking.” Post one ambiguous picture on Facebook and your life may quickly change for the worse.

## Examples

- Going into a non-kosher restaurant to buy something kosher, like a cup of coffee.
- Eating a cheeseburger in which either the cheese or the meat is fake.
- Eating fake treif, such as bacon bits or shrimp look-alikes, etc.
- Putting fake cream in coffee after meat meal.
- Going in a non-kosher butchery to buy bones for a dog.
- Eating Passover food that appears to be ḥametz. (For Ashkenazim, this includes kitniyot -- rice, corn, legumes, etc.)
- Doing these things while wearing a kippah (showing you are an observant Jew who knows the law).
- Some even rule that a Jew should not enter a non-traditional synagogue when people there are praying, so as not to make it appear he agrees with their interpretations of Judaism.

The Talmud gives many examples:

-One may not recite the Ten Commandments during services for fear that heretics might claim they are the only commandments in force. [Berakhot 12a, Tamid 5:1 (32b)]

-One may not hang up wet clothes on Shabbat, lest people think they were washed that day. [Shabbat 65a; Shulḥan Arukh, Orach Ḥayyim 301:45]

-Officials going in the Temple treasury were barefoot and wore clothes with no pockets or folds, to make it clear they could not hide any money. [Shekalim 3:2]

-If a house has two doors, Hanukkah candles must be lit at both, so that if a passer-by sees one door but not the other, he should not think the commandment was not fulfilled. [Shabbat 23a]

-Prominent families punctiliously refrained from behavior that might bring suspicion on them:

The Garmu family excelled in preparing the showbread [for the Temple]... but they also never made fancy bread in their homes, so that people would not say that they sustained themselves from their art of preparing the showbread [with ingredients that belonged to the Temple]...

Similarly, the Avtinas family excelled in preparing incense [for the Temple]... but a perfumed bride never emerged from their homes, and when they married a woman from a different place, they stipulated with her that she will not perfume herself, so that cynics would not say that it is with the [Temple's] incense that they perfumed themselves.

They [both] fulfilled that which is stated in the Torah:

And you shall be innocent before the Lord and before Israel. [Numbers 32:22]

[Yoma 38a]

-Do not serve fish blood in a serving bowl, because it might get confused with animal blood. The first is kosher, the second not. [Keritot 21b] Based on this:

-The Rashba prohibits cooking meat in human milk, even though human milk is pareve.

-The Rama prohibits cooking meat in almond milk because it looks similar to cow's milk (unless one leaves pieces of almond in the milk).

-Avoid even the appearance of idolatry. Maimonides writes:

One who had a splinter stuck in his foot and he happens to be before an idol, should not bow down to take it out because it will appear that he is bowing down to it. [Rambam, Mishneh Torah, Foreign Worship and Customs of the Nations 3:7]

One cannot help the feeling that the Sages always assumed that the average passer-by has the IQ of a cauliflower! ☺

## When does it apply?

-Does it apply in private?

Yes:

אָמַר רַב יְהוּדָה אָמַר רַב: כָּל מְקוֹם שֶׁאָסְרוּ חֲכָמִים מִפְּנֵי מַרְאִית הָעֵינַן — אֶפִּילוּ בְּחֻדְרֵי חֻדְרֵי אֶסּוּר.

Rav Yehudah said that Rav said: Wherever the Sages prohibited an action due to the appearance of a prohibition; the prohibition applies even in the innermost chambers, where no one will see it. [Shabbat 64b, Avodah Zarah 12a, Shabbat 146b, Shulhan Arukh Orach Hayyim 301:45]

This may mean one of two things:

-He might get so used to doing it that he would do it in public.

-He thinks he is not seen, but somebody may be watching.  
Some say it depends on conditions. The Talmud Yerushalmi presents it as a dispute [Kilayim 9:1].

-Does it apply in front of ignorant Jews?

No. Example: Most locusts are kosher. But most Jews don't know that and assume they are insects, hence unkosher. The practice is *not* to refrain from eating them because of *Marit Ayin*. [Moshe Feinstein, Igrot Moshe Orach Hayyim 1:96; 4:82]

-Once applied, does it apply eternally?

No. *Marit Ayin* prohibitions may get cancelled over time as people get used to new products or actions. [Shulhan Arukh , Orach Hayyim 243:2]

Examples:

-Non-dairy creamers are so common today that using them after a meat meal is no longer prohibited.

-The Torah [Deut. 22:11] forbids wearing a mixture of wool and linen (שַׁעֲטָנִי -- shaatnez). The Mishnah [Kilayim 9:2-3] ruled that combining wool and silk was allowed, yet later rabbis forbade it due to *Marit Ayin*. Later still, it was allowed again [Shulhan Arukh Yoreh Deah 298:1] because silk had become so common that it was easily recognizable.

## Give the benefit of the doubt

The Mishna says that Jews are supposed to practice דָּן אֶת כָּל הָאָדָם לְכַף זְכוּת *dan l'khaf zekhut* [Avot 1:6] -- giving people the benefit of the doubt, judging them favorably [Lev. 19:15], not thinking ill of them, but rather advising them as needed. [Shevuot 30a] Maimonides says that if you see someone you do not know do something that can be interpreted as good or bad, assume it's good. [Rambam on Avot 1:6]

This softens one of the two reasons of *Marit Ayin*: Others might think ill of you.

## Conclusion

You may not ignore what others will think of your actions, because their contempt might hurt you, or, most importantly, they may think your seemingly inappropriate behavior is something they should emulate. Because human nature makes one prone to suspect others, the principle of *Marit Ayin* is needed. But it should be left up to the individual's judgment as to when to apply it.

Shabbat shalom.