

## Higher standards for righteous people?

In this week's Torah portion, *Shemot*, we read about a very strange occurrence:

The Lord met [Moses], and sought to kill him. Then [Moses' wife] Tzipporah took a sharp stone, and cut off the foreskin of her [newborn] son... So [God] let [Moses] go... [Ex. 4:24-26]

What does this mean? Apparently, God wants to kill Moses for not circumcizing his newborn son at the commanded time. Isn't that a bit extreme? Let's look at the context. God had just ordered Moses to go to Egypt to free the Israelites. Moses reasoned: "If I circumcize my son right away, I have to delay the trip to Egypt because it's risky for a child to travel right after circumcision. If I leave right away as God commanded (and God knows I have a newborn son), I have to delay the circumcision. I'll delay the circumcision." So far, it makes sense. However,

-Rashi points out that as soon as Moses arrived at an inn to spend the night, he made lodging arrangements instead of circumcising his son right away. [Rashi on Nedarim 31b-32a]

-The Ran, 14<sup>th</sup>-century Catalanian rabbi, adds that the inn was close enough to Egypt that the short trip would not endanger the child's health. [Ran on Nedarim 31b-32a]

For failure to see all this, God was about to kill Moses.

But the penalty for failure to circumcise a son is not death! In fact, the Torah prescribes NO penalty to the father, and the only penalty to the son is to be cut off from the community of Israel until he gets circumcized. [Gen. 17:14]

The Mishna says that the purpose of the incident is just to highlight the importance of circumcision, implying that perhaps God did not intend to carry out the threat:

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Karha said: Great is [the commandment of] circumcision, for even Moses did not have his punishment suspended, even for a single hour, for neglecting it. [Nedarim 31b]

The Midrash adds that Tzipporah, Moses' wife, said:

How great is the power of circumcision! My husband was liable to death because he was lax in performing the commandment of circumcision [on our son]! and concludes:

If not for her, [Moses] would not have been saved. [Exodus R. 5:8]

This is still not satisfying. The Talmud takes another tack and suggests that God holds the most righteous people, such as Moses, to a higher standard, witness the following story:

[Rabbi] Nahum of Gamzu was blind in both eyes, his hands and legs were amputated, his whole body was covered with boils, and he was lying in a dilapidated house on a bed whose feet were standing in bowls of water to prevent the ants from crawling on to him...

His students said to him: "Master, since you are wholly righteous, why has all this befallen you?"

He replied: "Once... a poor man... stopped me... and said: 'Master, give me something to eat.' I said: 'Wait until I finish unloading the ass.' I had hardly unloaded the ass when the man died [of hunger]. [And this was my punishment for waiting so long.]" [Ta'anit 21a]

This passage has been used to explain the suffering and martyrdom of many Sages of the Talmud.

The Talmud also suggests that God is more stringent with those closest to Him, just as parents are stricter with their own children so they grow up properly:

The Holy One, blessed be He, deals strictly with those around Him [i.e., the righteous], even to a hair's breadth. [Yevamot 121b]

The Talmud also reminds us that, when well-known Torah scholars misbehave, they bring shame not only on themselves but on the entire Jewish people and on the Torah:

What constitutes profanation of the Name [of God]?.. If someone studies Scripture and Mishnah, attends on the disciples of the wise, but is dishonest in business, and discourteous in his relations with people, what do people say about him? Woe unto him who studied the Torah! Woe unto his father who taught him Torah! Woe unto his teacher who taught him Torah! This man studied the Torah: Look, how corrupt are his deeds, how ugly his ways! [Yoma 86a]

So all Jews are held to a higher standard, and the State of Israel as a nation also. We were given the mission of representing God and Torah to the world, and our rabbis even more than others. Sadly, in recent years we have witnessed prominent rabbis in our communities found guilty of embezzlement, complicity to murder, pederasty, adultery, sexual harassment, voyeurism, and other transgressions. Yes, there are bad

apples in every lot, and yes, rabbis are human and not immune from wrongdoing. But what they do, rightly or wrongly, does reflect on all Jews, on Judaism, and on the Torah, and for this they are made to pay a higher price.

Apologists have suggested that some of the misbehavior was for the greater public good, such as Robin-Hood-style stealing from the rich to benefit the poor. But the end does not justify the means in Judaism. The Torah says:

*Tzedek, tzedek tirdof* -- Justice, justice shall you pursue. [Deut. 16:20]

But, one might argue, rabbis who break the law are generally punished according to the law. They not punished MORE, are they? Yes, they are. Because in addition to legal sanctions, they also lose their jobs and their benefits, they can't find new ones, they are ostracized, their spouses leave them, their children shun them, they suffer opprobrium and vilification at a much higher level than a less prominent person. The higher they climb, the harder they fall.

In a different tack, the Talmud also suggests that the suffering of the righteous benefits the world:

During all the years that Rabbi Eleazar suffered, no man died prematurely.

During all the years that Rabbi [Yehuda HaNasi] suffered, the world needed no rain [because everything grew without rain]. [Bava Metzia 85a]

This notion is difficult to accept, on many levels.

The Midrash even says that if you know the law, and transgress anyway, you are punished more severely than someone who does not know the law:

Rabbi Shim'on ben Halafta said: One who studies the commandments of the Torah, but does not fulfill them, is punished more severely than one who never studied at all. [Deuteronomy R. 7:4]

This is a bit disturbing, because it gives us an excuse not to study at all! Believe it or not, Jewish law even says that, in minor cases, if a rabbi determines that the people are going to do a certain wrong thing no matter what he says, it is better not to tell them that they are breaking a commandment, because by teaching them that, they would then break the commandment deliberately. The Talmud says:

It is better to transgress unintentionally than intentionally. [Betzah 30a]

However, Rav Moshe Feinstein emphasized in the sixties that if there is even a *slight* possibility that the people will listen, and change their ways,

the rabbi MUST inform them of the law and insist that they follow it. So it's a matter of perception.

The Talmud lays down the general principle that rabbis must not issue a decree that they know the people cannot follow:

We do not lay a hardship on the community unless the majority can endure it.  
[Baba Batra 60b]

In capital cases (say, murder or adultery), ignorance of the law is a valid defense. A Jewish court requires two witnesses to give evidence that the defendant was taught ahead of time that his action carries the death penalty. Without that warning, he cannot be convicted.

But there is more, and it concerns all of you here today. Listen carefully: Our tradition also teaches that, if you lower your observance of Judaism, you get judged more severely than someone who has always been low on observance. The Talmud says:

Rabin son of Rabbi Adda says in the name of Rabbi Yitzchak: If someone attends synagogue [regularly] and one day he does not go, the Holy One, blessed be He, inquires about him... If He [finds that he] missed to perform a mitzvah, he is justified, but if he missed because of a mundane matter, he will not be successful [in that mundane matter]. [Berachot 6b]

So the Talmud suggests that a regular worshipper is risking God's wrath and punishment if he misses an occasional service, and implies that one who does not attend services regularly is not subject to such high scrutiny.

Tradition generally teaches that if you go up, you get rewarded no matter how low you started from; but if you go down, you get punished no matter how high you started from. In other words, on a scale from 1 to 10 in observance, if you go from 2 to 3 you get rewarded, but if you go from 8 to 7 you get punished.

Also, the Mishna says:

Ben He He says: The reward is according to the effort. [Pirkei Avot 5:21]

This implies that mitzvot that require more effort count for more. The Talmud adds:

One mitzvah involving pain is worth a hundred mitzvot that do not. [Jerusalem Talmud]

Rabbi Eliyahu Eliezer Dessler, from early-20<sup>th</sup>-century Europe, notes that someone born into an observant family will receive little reward for observance, because it took little effort. Keeping commandments is

automatic for him. However, someone born in a secular family will receive much reward for being observant, and very little, if any, punishment for not studying Torah. [Rabbi E.E. Dessler, Michtav M'Eliyahu 1, p 113]

This raises some thorny questions. First, isn't every Jew held to the same commandments and the same penalties for transgressing? Why should some be penalized more harshly for infractions? Why study if the result of knowledge is higher penalties? Because God has ordered us to do so? Why be a leader? For satisfaction? For power? For control?

Here is the bottom line. Like it or not, a prominent individual is always going to be held to a higher standard of behavior, because his words and actions have far-reaching effects. The higher the EFFECT of his transgression, the higher the punishment.

Is this fair? Well, it depends on what you mean by "fair". If you enjoy studying to acquire knowledge, and derive satisfaction from doing the right thing, (and, in passing, gaining the admiration of others), then you don't mind being judged more severely. You wouldn't have it any other way, if the alternative is ignorance, mediocrity, and irrelevance.

Shabbat shalom.