Parashat Netzavim – 5778 – The Mysteries of Life

Rabbi Marc Israel

“I have a secret to tell you, but don’t tell anyone.”

How often do we hear someone say this or do we say it ourselves?

But, if you think about it, this is truly an oxymoronic statement. As soon as someone tells the secret, it already becomes less and less of a secret. What’s more – knowing something is a secret piques our curiosity and makes us want to learn even more about it.

This week in the news, we have heard about secret conversations, secret emails and secret identities. But I’m not interested in addressing those secrets.

The secret that I want to explore with you this morning is found in our Torah portion, not in the New York Times.

In the midst of Parashat Netzavim, Moses is telling the people everything they need to know as they prepare to enter the Land of Israel. He explains the laws and the covenant and the benefits and punishments if we adhere to our end of the bargain. Then, right in the middle of this, we find an unusual verse.

הנסתרת ליהוה אלהינו והנגלת לנו ולבנינו עד־עולם לעשות את־כל־דברי התורה הזאת (ס)

This is translated in our Chumash as: Concealed acts concern the LORD our God; but with overt acts, it is for us and our children ever to apply all the provisions of this Teaching.

But as we will see, the meaning of this verse is anything but clear.

The verse is unusual in many respects.

First, it is written differently in the Torah, with dots over the letters of the words Lanu u’l’vavenu, making these words stand out visually from the rest of the Torah. We don’t know exactly why those dots are there, but they are certainly intended to call our attention to something special about the verse.

But the real mystery surrounds the meaning of the verse itself.

What the these great nistarot, the concealed or secret acts? And more importantly, why are they there? How do they compare to the niglot, the revealed acts?

Our commentators give us at least 5 possible ways to understand this verse:

1. Rashi says the nistarot are sins that are done privately, behind closed doors, whereas the niglot are the transgressions that happen publicly. The secret deeds are for God to deal with – we as humans only need to worry about what is done publicly.

Therefore, perhaps the idea that the nistarot belong to God is a way to protect our privacy, so others won’t go snooping in our bedroom to see what we are doing behind closed doors.

Or perhaps it’s more of a warning to us, so we don’t think we can get away with anything even when we are alone, because God is always watching. But either way, Rashi teaches that what happens in private is just between you and God.

1. Another possibility is that the nistarot refers to things that never get brought before the courts, even though others may be aware of them. We are told God will deal with them, trying to reassure us that we live in a just world, even though we don’t always see the justice carried out. Rashbam teaches that for the nistarot, the retribution comes from God, not us.
2. The idea that the hidden things belong to God may also be a way for Moses to calm the people. They were worried that if one person denied God, even in that person’s own heart, the whole people might be punished on account of the one individual. According to Da’at Zekanim, this verse teaches that God will take care of such people individually and not mete out collective punishment.
3. Fourth, RAMBAM tell us that the nistarot refer to false testimony by witnesses who were deemed to be reliable. The court is not responsible for a bad verdict in such a situation, for they had no reasonable way to know that the witnesses were lying. Our verse tells us that God will handle the justice in those situations.
4. Finally, Ramban has a different understanding – it is not about whether an act was done publicly or privately, nor is the Torah worried here about issues of collective punishment, the justice system or witnesses lying. He teaches that the nistarot refers to the transgressions that are committed by a person who is unware of his or her transgression – this is what is hidden. According to this idea, the verse teaches that God will forgive us for the sins that we committed unwittingly, since we have no way to repent for them. But for everything else, we must repent.

So many interpretations can really only mean one thing - the meaning of the nistarot – the hidden secrets – is itself a mystery.

But I think we can see an important strand that underlies each of these interpretations, that is central to the concept of nistarot. This is the idea of humility. To accept the idea that there are nistarot laAdonai – hidden realms that belong to God alone – is to accept that there is a limit to human knowledge. We use scientific evidence and our creative minds to help us understand the world and universe in very sophisticated ways. Things that were once unimaginable are now a reality – there is so much that once was hidden but is now revealed to us. But yet, this verse tells us that there is a limit - there are, and there always will be, some mysteries to the universe that we cannot know.

The rational side of us may not accept that idea easily, but often the more one learns, the more one understands the limits of our knowledge. Albert Einstein, who rejected the notion of a God of reward and punishment and of a God who would intervene in the natural world, did not reject the notion of a higher power altogether. He explained that “What separates me from most so-called atheists is a feeling of utter humility toward the unattainable secrets of the harmony of the cosmos.”

“The unattainable secrets of the harmony of the cosmos” – This may be the best translation of hanistarot la’Adonai that I have seen.

I find this reminder of the limits of human knowledge to be particularly important at this time of year. As we prepare to enter the Yamim Noraim – these days of Awe – we are called upon to hold ourselves accountable for our past deeds and to look forward to how we can do better in the year to come. And yet we recognize that regardless of the words we say and the prayers that we utter, we don’t really understand how the world operates. Do most of us believe that there is a God who is recording our every deed? I suspect not, at least not in a literal way. But we also know enough to recognize that the world operates in mysterious ways that we do not know.

הנסתרת ליהוה אלהינו והנגלת לנו ולבנינו עד־עולם – those mysteries belong to God. We don’t get to know the secrets. So we must operate in the world that we do know, to do the best that we can with הנגלת – the things that are revealed. We may recognize the limits of our knowledge, but the second part of the verse is also important, for it tells us that this limit should not prevent us from acting. We are responsible to do the best that we can, to make ourselves the best people that we can, with the knowledge we possess.

As for the rest, we turn to God and we pray that despite our limitations – or even because of our limitations – that God will not be hidden from us.

As the words of the Psalm for this season say:

אַל־תַּסְתֵּר פָּנֶיךָ מִמֶּנִּי אַל־תַּט־בְּאַף עַבְדֶּךָ עֶזְרָתִי הָיִיתָ אַל־תִּטְּשֵׁנִי

וְאַל־תַּעַזְבֵנִי אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׁעִי׃

Do not hide Your face from me; do not thrust aside Your servant in anger; You have ever been my help. Do not forsake me, do not abandon me, O God, my deliverer.

Shhh…I have a secret. I just can’t tell you what it is.

Shabbat shalom.