

Rabbi's Column

The story in this week's Torah portion is the only one that involves Isaac in active roles. The last couple of weeks he played an important part in Abraham and Sarah's stories, but this week he gets his own spotlight for a few literary moments. Related to this (I will tell you how, shortly) is that while Mordechai is on stage quite often during the Book of Esther, he has only one speaking part.

One lesson I get from combining these two bits of information is that a person's importance is not measured by their moments in the spotlights or the volume of their speech (both in terms of loudness and in terms of sheer amount). A person's importance can also be measured by how they continue and extend what happened before them, as well as how much integrity they are filled with.

On a slightly different topic, these days I become more impressed with Jewish jurisprudence. Granted, the system, especially for crimes involving the death penalty, may never have been actually used since we were often ruled by other people. Here are some of the principles and ramifications that have been recently floating in my mind:

Ignorance of the law is an excuse. Since that is true, and because the Torah requires two witnesses to an event for it to attain legal status, one of the jobs of the witness is to warn the perpetrator that what they are doing is illegal and to let them know what the punishment will be. This warning functions like a blessing, in that both need to be connected closely in time to the event they describe.

When all that is involved is money, you can accept a person's sworn word for what they have done. When their own life is involved, you may not accept, ask for, or make use of, what a person might have to say about their own actions. It doesn't matter whether you are silent or not - we have a responsibility to ignore anything you might say about yourself or your family - as allowing you to implicate yourself or your family is slightly disrespectful towards God.

The Jewish legal system presumes that God is part of the system, and punishing the innocent individual (in cases where the individual is on trial) is far worse than not punishing the guilty. The system does agree with the current model of public opinion in that often an individual's actions can affect an innocent group in which that person happens to be. The biblical example *par excellence* is contained in the traditional second paragraph of the Shma, where we are told that if some do not follow God's ways, then nobody will get rain at the right times to grow enough food. Today, we have many cases where if one actor or actress is behaving inappropriately, everyone involved with the show they had been on is punished by subsequent loss of royalties and public exposure when the show is cancelled and pulled out of syndication.

When it happens that a witness lies because they want to punish the person they are accusing, the system imposes the punishment they had planned to inflict upon the innocent person on them instead. I do think it is interesting that an integral part of the Jewish justice system assumes that people will sometimes lie in order to punish others. The majority will tell the truth as they know it - but there is always that pesky minority.

May all of us be fortunate enough in our lives to never be harmed by that pesky minority, and may we strive mightily to avoid declaring internally that the ends justify the means so that we are willing to stretch the truth in order to punish somebody we can't stand.

