

## Pikudei: Don't Walk Away

Moshe Taragin

This was meant to be Moshe Rabeinu's finest moment—the culmination of two years of courage and heroism. He had defied the most powerful tyrant of the ancient world and brought the mighty Egyptian empire to its knees. He had led a nation of slaves to freedom, guiding them through the perilous desert. He had split a roaring sea and delivered the word of Hashem from heaven. When we betrayed Hashem at the egel, Moshe ascended once more, spending forty days and nights without food or water, pleading for our survival and begging Hashem to overlook our sins.

Finally Moshe had single-handedly spearheaded the grand construction of a house to shelter the Divine presence. A radiant glow shone from his forehead, a mark of a man who, though bound by flesh, had dwelled in the realm of heaven. His credentials were unquestionable.

Or so he thought.

As the grand construction neared completion, the cynics crept out of the shadows. Whispers spread, questioning Moshe Rabeinu's sudden wealth. Perhaps he and his brother had skimmed materials from the Mishkan, siphoning off gold and silver for their own gain. So much wealth, so many donations—who could be sure that none had found its way into his pockets? The skeptics and the disbelievers, began casting doubt on Moshe's moral integrity.

You would have expected Moshe to ignore the barking of these dogs. The vast majority of the nation surely possessed unwavering trust in him. The cynics who hurled accusations and mockery were unlikely to be convinced, no matter what he said. Moshe's reputation and moral standing were unshakable and responding to their baseless claims would only diminish the grandeur and majesty of the inauguration of the house of Hashem.

The Accountant

And yet, Moshe did not ignore the naysayers. Instead, he provided a meticulous accounting of every donation collected for the Mishkan and a precise record of how each material was used in its construction. He assembled a committee of overseers to ensure that every detail was beyond suspicion, that nothing was hidden, and that the sacred project remained untainted by even the faintest shadow of doubt.

This exhaustive accounting forms the bulk of Parashat Pekudei. Unlike other parshiyot of the Torah that introduce new halachot or spiritual insights, this portion is essentially an inventory—an unembellished registry of materials and their precise roles in the Mishkan's construction.

### Transparency

Moshe's accounting provides an essential moral principle: the obligation to uphold the highest standards in the public eye, known in Hebrew as avoiding any trace of suspicion or *marit ayin*. It is not enough for a person to act with integrity; they must also ensure that their actions are above suspicion, that their intentions are transparent, and that their purity of conduct is unmistakable.

For Moshe, it was not sufficient to know in his heart that he had acted with absolute honesty, that he had taken nothing for himself. It was crucial that he remain beyond reproach—not only in the eyes of G-d and his own conscience but also in the eyes of the people he led.

### Defiant, but aware

The principle of *marit ayin* establishes a delicate balance between unwavering commitment to personal convictions and the equally vital responsibility of providing moral clarity, ensuring that one's actions do not invite suspicion.

Deeply committed religious individuals must learn to deflect social pressures while standing firm in their beliefs and adhering to their personal moral code. If we allow our convictions to waver in the face of public scrutiny or scorn, our principles can quickly erode.

We were chosen as a *stiff-necked people*—a trait that, at times, has led to our struggles but is also indispensable in resisting ridicule and mockery. Lives of religious spirit and steadfast commitment, will inevitably face societal ridicule. Without resilience and inner fortitude, the pressures of public opinion can chip away at even the strongest foundation of religious commitment.

Yet, we are also expected to be mindful of how our actions are perceived, ensuring that we do not behave in a way that could be misinterpreted as immoral. Faith demands conviction and awareness—the strength to stand firm in our beliefs and the wisdom to present them in a manner that upholds integrity in the eyes of others.

Too much sensitivity to public opinion, and we risk forfeiting our values and convictions. Too much defiance and indifference to public perception, and we invite suspicion and cynicism.

People seeking a way out of religious life will often seize upon perceived moral failings within religious figures to justify their own disengagement. Sadly, many abandon their faith, not because of theological struggles, but because they witness—or believe they witness—immoral behavior among those who should be exemplars of religious devotion. Of course, it is unfair to judge Judaism by the flaws of individual Jews, just as it is unfair to assume wrongdoing without clear evidence. Yet perception matters, and as Moshe taught, integrity must be as visible as it is real.

In our effort to showcase the beauty and dignity of a life of faith, it is not enough to simply be right. We must also ensure that those who observe us—those who, for better or worse, will judge religion by our conduct—come away with a positive impression. Our actions should not only reflect truth and righteousness but also inspire others toward spirit and religion.

It is not easy to strike this delicate balance between ignoring public ridicule and ensuring that we do not tarnish others' perception of religion. Walking this tightrope requires both unwavering conviction and thoughtful awareness—remaining steadfast in our faith while ensuring that our actions reflect the beauty and integrity of a life devoted to G-d.

While Moshe faced this dilemma as an individual, our people now face it as a nation.

## Israel's test

We all know. We all know the moral standards guiding our war. We all know the immense risks we take to protect civilian lives, even at the cost of endangering our own soldiers. We all know that the ratio of combatant to civilian casualties in this war is among the lowest in the history of urban warfare. We all know that Hamas shamelessly uses civilians as shields, treating them as expendable pawns. We all know that the accusations of genocide and ethnic cleansing are not just false but outrageous distortions of reality.

Yet, in the face of these undeniable truths, hatred rages on, unrelenting and venomous. A tidal wave of blind antisemitism crashes against us. The desire to tune it all out, to ignore the deafening cacophony of lies and distortions, is overwhelming. They won't listen anyway. The haters will continue to hate, twisting reality into grotesque narratives to justify their loathing of the Jewish people. Just walk away. Ignore them. Let them stew in their own malice.

We cannot just walk away. We cannot completely absolve ourselves of accountability. We bear a profound moral responsibility—not to our detractors, but to ourselves and to the Jewish conscience. We must etch our actions into the record of history, preserving the integrity of our moral conduct and the justness of our battle to protect our people and our homeland. With unwavering clarity, we must proclaim the righteousness of our ethical code, refusing to let hatred cloud our convictions or erode our moral resolve.

Will anyone listen? Some will, but most will not. But that is not why we speak. Jews do what is right because it is right—not to sway the minds of those who refuse to see. We answer to the voice within, to the moral compass woven into our soul. We answer to our history, to a destiny that calls us to live by a higher code, shaped by the Torah. We know who we are. They cannot fathom it. Our tireless efforts to explain may fall on deaf ears—but we hear, and we know.

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