

Dear Chavraya,

I have learned an entirely new vocabulary in recent months. Unlearned in matters of finance, I have never before known of such things as “toxic assets,” “derivatives,” or “hedge funds.” Unfortunately, my new awareness has been gained due to the great harm done to people and the nation itself through avarice, moral blindness and spiritual atrophy.

In all of this, there is an essential religious question that we all ask at one time or another, but which needs to be asked now. Looking at the ills of his own time, so too the Kotzker Rebbe asked, “Where is God?” He answered, “where ever we let God in.” God has been banished from the marketplace. God is present everywhere and at all times, but awareness of God’s presence depends on us. In Biblical Hebrew there is no word for religion, all of life to be lived with an awareness of the holy. The words inscribed above the holy ark in many synagogues are to be the “escutcheon” upon our hearts, *da lifnei mi ata omed/ Know before Whom you stand.*

Many of those who have acted out of greed continue to believe that they are religious people, thereby deceiving God, themselves, and others. It is all a single act of deception. In Jewish tradition there is no separation between one’s relationship with God and with people. There are two broad categories of mitzvot, those that are *beyn adam l’chavero/between a person and their fellow*, and those that are *beyn adam l’makom/between a person and God*. That ultimately these become one category in two parts is illuminated in this week’s Torah portion, *parashat Vayikra*. In regard to laws concerning restitution and sin offerings, we are told, *If a person sins and commits a breach of trust against God by deceiving their neighbor with regard to an article given in trust, or a loan, or an object taken by robbery, or something having been withheld from a neighbor, or has found a lost article and denies it, or has sworn to a lie regarding anything of that which a person may do to sin in this respect....*

All of these acts against the wellbeing of other people are introduced as sins against God, *ma’alah ma’al bashem/committing a breach of trust against God*. The root *ma’al*, meaning to deal treacherously or faithlessly, is the same root as that of *m’il*, which means “mantle” or “robe,” as in that of the high priest. Another example of a Hebrew root that expresses dissonance between outer appearance and inner reality is *begeh*, which forms the word for both clothing and deceit. So much damage has been done, and so much pain caused, by those whose outer garb conveys trust, responsibility, faithfulness, while masking deceit and contempt.

In the context of *Vayikra*, of sin offerings and restitution, the framework is foreign to us, while the teaching needs to be reclaimed and made familiar. From the sixteenth century, Rabbi Isaiah Horowitz speaks of *Sefer Vayikra* as *tikkun ha’adam*, a guide to human repair. Drawing near to God’s presence, may we draw near to each other, weaving garments of truth and integrity from threads of inner light, repairing the social fabric, renewing the commonweal.

Shabbat shalom
Rabbi Victor