

ACCOUNTABILITY

by Rabbi Berel Wein

The main lesson of this week's Torah reading, which may possibly be obscured by the wealth of Mishkan detail that appears in these closing chapters of the book of Shemot,, is the basic Jewish concept of accountability. Moshe accounts for all of the work that was done in the construction of the Mishkan/tabernacle and for every shekel that was expended in that project.

Moshe was troubled when he could not initially account for the one thousand shekels that were apparently missing and that did not allow him to balance the books fully. Only later, when he was able to recall that the missing silver was used to fashion the hooks that held the curtains of the structure, was his account complete and fully accurate.

In the last analysis of life, accountability is the main challenge and test that faces us. King Solomon in Kohelet informs us that all of our actions and behavior will be accounted for in God's system of justice. It is this concept of accountability that allows the basic axiom of Jewish life, reward and punishment, the temporal and eternal, to function.

One of the great weaknesses of individuals and societies is that they somehow feel that they are not accountable for their errors, sins, omissions and failures. We live in a world where everyone and everything is entitled to a pass. In our Torah-only educational system, the older the student becomes and the higher the level and reputation of the institution he or she attends, the weaker the demands of accountability become.

Without a system of testing, and with no realistic goals for scholarship there is a complete lack of accountability. In the long run this is destructive to the individual and to the system itself.

In democracies, elections held periodically are meant to hold political leaders accountable. Though in practice this does not always work, the theory of accountability is at least present in the society and the political system. In a dictatorship there never is any voluntary day of reckoning or demand for accountability.

No one likes to be beholden to the judgment of others, therefore we see that in businesses, educational institutions, social agencies and religious institutions, mini-dictatorships abound. The prophets of Israel held the leaders and the people of Israel accountable to the moral teachings of the Torah and to God Himself, so to speak. Thus the prophets of Israel served as the necessary brake to an otherwise dictatorial, all-powerful monarchy.

The rabbis of the Talmud were acutely aware that they were accountable for their decisions and behavior. Often times that sense of accountability focused on the presence of another individual rabbi to whom one somehow felt accountable. The great Mar Shmuel mourned the death of Rav by saying that the "person that I feared and was accountable to is no longer with us." The idea of accountability stretches over generations. We are all accountable for the past and for the future. And it is in that light that we will certainly be judged, and how the accomplishments of our lifetime will be marked and assessed.

Shabbat shalom

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Rabbi Berel Wein- Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at www.rabbiwein.com