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By
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Here are a few recent news items: (Please have your aspirins ready!)

A former Prime Minister of Israel was sentenced to a prison term for illegal business dealings.

An Israeli man was arrested for trying to export jet parts to Iran.

An Orthodox head of a Jewish charity agency in New York was arrested and pleaded guilty to embezzling millions of dollars.

An Orthodox rabbi and three accomplices, who were ostensibly raising funds for a school for disadvantaged children in Brooklyn, were arrested for embezzling millions of dollars.

All of these people are well educated. They all know right from wrong. They all know that their deeds were illegal and immoral. Yet, they went right ahead and committed crimes.

Why?

Apparently, each of these people—and so many others like them—placed their immediate gratification ahead of other considerations. They were willing to engage in corrupt practices that provided them with money; and they somehow blocked the fact that there would be consequences to their behavior. Perhaps they thought they would get away with their crimes. Perhaps they thought they were smarter than “the system.” In the case of the man who was trying to sell jet parts to Iran, he must not have worried that those very items could be used by Iran to attack Israel or other countries. He was happy to have his profit, without considering that his illegal transactions could result in death and destruction to his own people.

Short-sightedness is an all too common failing of human beings. People seek immediate pleasure or profit, without thinking ahead and without considering long range consequences. Short-sightedness leads to many pitfalls and crimes.

In this week’s Torah portion, we read of the census conducted to determine the number of Israelites eligible to serve in defense of the nation. The Torah specifies that each person was counted by name and by family. Those counted were to be

viewed as human beings with individual identities, not as ciphers or statistics.

The census was taken not merely to count the people, but to impress them with the fact that the nation counts on them. They each had responsibilities to themselves, to their families, to the entire people of Israel. Their deeds were not anonymous; rather, whatever they did would reflect on themselves, their families and their people. The Torah did not merely want a count of soldiers; it wanted the soldiers to see themselves in a wider context, to consider consequences of their behavior. Their actions counted, and could impact positively or negatively.

Unless each individual recognizes his/her role as a moral agent, then moral decay sets in. People don't think of what is right, but of what seems expedient or profitable to themselves.

Albert Einstein described the moral decay which he felt was setting into society. "One misses the elementary reaction against injustice and for justice—that reaction which in the long run represents man's only protection against a relapse into barbarism. I am firmly convinced that the passionate will for justice and truth has done more to improve man's condition than calculating political shrewdness which in the long run only breeds general distrust. Who can doubt that Moses was a better leader of humanity than Machiavelli?" ("Out of My Later Years," Citadel Press, Secaucus, 1956, p. 10.)

When a census is taken of the people, it is not only to count how many we are. It is also to remind us that each of us counts.

Angel for Shabbat