

Shabbat Aharei Mot-Kedoshim 5781
We Are Always On, Even When the Zoom Camera is Off
Rabbi Alex Freedman

Shabbat Shalom!

Ocean's 11 ranks in my top ten for favorite movies. The heist comedy film was released 20 years ago but hasn't lost its shine. It's a remake of the 1960 Rat Pack film of the same name, and it features a star-studded cast. It follows George Clooney's character and friends, who plan to rob \$160 million from casino owner Andy Garcia's character, because he is now with Clooney's ex-wife Julia Roberts' character. It's the perfect film to watch on the weekend when we read the verse in Parashat Kedoshim, "Do not take revenge against your neighbor." Because the film is all about sweet, sweet payback.

There's a scene toward the end that I recall best. Garcia's casino has security cameras everywhere, unsurprisingly, to protect his money. When Garcia realizes that Clooney is robbing him, Clooney asks him, seemingly alone in the hallway, "What would you say if I told you you could get your money back if you gave up Tess, [Julia Roberts' character, Clooney's ex-wife]?" Garcia says, Yes, he would give up his love to get back his money.

Meanwhile, Clooney's brilliant team has arranged things so that Julia Roberts is watching this conversation live on the security camera feed. It's a setup for her to learn how he really feels when she's not around. And this is bad news for Garcia, who just said he'd rather have his money back than her. Julia Roberts later confronts him with this exquisite line: "You of all people should know, Terry: in your hotel, there's *a/ways* someone watching."

Now that's a theological truth: there's always someone watching us too.

Parashat Kedoshim teaches the same lesson loudly quietly. I'll explain what I mean soon.

Let's take a minute to name the most famous verses in Parshat Kedoshim, which is, like Ocean's Eleven, an all-star lineup:

Be holy for I G-d am holy.
Revere your mother and father.
When you reap your harvest, don't reap all the way to the edges.
Don't lie.
Don't insult the deaf or place a stumbling block before the blind.
Don't stand idly by the blood of your neighbor.
Don't take revenge or bear a grudge against your fellow.
Love your neighbor as yourself.

That's quite a list.

But one of the most important - and the most frequent - verse phrases isn't on this list: *Ani Hashem*. I am G-d. Besides the obvious - of course G-d will say that G-d is G-d - what does this phrase *mean*? And why does it show up at the end of certain Mitzvot in the Parsha? And why does *Ani Hashem* appear after basically every other verse? 16 times in 37 verses?

What is the innocuous phrase *Ani Hashem* about? I call it loudly quiet because it's so predominant and also so vague.

I want to share an old interpretation and a new one:

First the classic view of Rashi, which I summarize: *Ani Hashem* is a tagline that appears at the end of Mitzvot which only the person performing the act is aware of transgressing it or not. There might be nobody around, and the court could not prove the transgression. When one might wrongly believe, "Nobody is watching, so I can get away with this," the Torah says *Ani Hashem* to teach that G-d is always around and will hold people accountable. Sometimes the verse adds "You shall fear your G-d" for the same reason. The Torah reminds us "*Ani Hashem*, I am G-d who is always watching you."

Rashi shares this comment about verse 19:14: "You shall not insult the deaf, or place a stumbling block before the blind. You shall fear your G-d, *Ani Hashem*." Rashi would say it doesn't matter that nobody might be around to hear you curse the deaf person-certainly the deaf person can't hear - but G-d knows.

And, interestingly, he interprets 'not placing a stumbling block before the blind' metaphorically. The Etz Hayim Humash summarizes it well: "The term 'blind' refers not only to one who is physically blind but also to one who is intellectually deficient, lacking appropriate information, or morally blinded by emotions, according to Samson Rafael Hirsch. For example, one violates this law by deliberately giving bad advice, by providing someone with the means to do wrong whom you know cannot resist the temptation, or by provoking a short-tempered person to lash out in anger." So Rashi means that nobody should intentionally mislead another with advice in an area of shortcoming, where that person has a *blind spot*. And we all have blind spots. Again, nobody else would know that someone might intentionally give bad advice, so that's *precisely* the place where the Torah reminds us, "though nobody else might be around, *Ani Hashem*." G-d is watching.

So much of our true character emerges when nobody is watching-for bad and for good. For bad, see foolish Andy Garcia's character in Ocean's Eleven. For good, see my former Camp Ramah in Wisconsin Rosh Aidah Zach. He was my Rosh Aidah when I was in Bogrim at age 14. I had been to camp long enough to know that the counselors and Rosh Aidah work really hard, don't get enough sleep, and sleep in on their days off. This means that they skip davening that morning's prayer services because Minyan is early. One morning in the middle of the summer, Zach had one of his few precious days off. After breakfast, my friends and I were walking back to our cabin to *not* clean up our cabin during Nikayon cleanup time. On our way back through the Kikar, I saw Zach alone in a room at a distance, doing something I never expected him to

do. I caught him in the act - he was davening! Even though Minyan was over; despite the fact that it was his day off and he didn't have to; even though he thought nobody was watching him, he davened Shahrith by himself. He understood *Ani Hashem*. That made me realize, "Wow, davening really is important to him. That's who he really is because he's doing it when nobody is watching." I had tremendous respect for him because of that out-of-sight behavior. And I really believe he wasn't trying for us to see him. As a post-script, when I went to college in St. Louis years later, he invited my friend and me to his apartment for Shabbat dinner. Again, he didn't have to. But our true character shows when we think we're not being watched. *Ani Hashem*. There's an element of fear here, of being on our best behavior because we are afraid of transgressing against G-d. Sometimes - but not always - that fear is healthy and productive.

But that's not the only way to interpret *Ani Hashem*. For a contemporary interpretation, I turned to Sivan Rahav Meir. She is a current famous Israeli journalist who, as an Orthodox woman, loves to share and teach thoughts on the Torah reading too. As she said, she thinks what Sara Imeinu says, Sarah our Matriarch, is at least as important as what Sara Netanyahu says. Sivan Rahav Meir writes in her book called #Parsha about the phrase *Ani Hashem*, as this tagline appears at the end of another classic verse. The famous phrase "Love your neighbor as yourself" continues *Ani Hashem*.

She writes, "When you understand that you were both created by G-d who gave you both a soul, then you will love your neighbor because you are both part of humanity, and the bonds of solidarity and commitment connect you. In short, I love you because I love myself, because we are both part of the same whole." In other words, the words *Ani Hashem* can also inspire love, not just fear. We should love our neighbor because they too are created in G-d's image. We should love ourselves for the same reason. *Ani Hashem* inspires us to be our best when nobody is watching too.

We're all connected because we're all created by the living G-d. The Covid vaccine response has brought out ugliness in some people and beauty in others. There's a person in Evanston, Eli Coustan, who created a website called ILVaccine in February to help the appointment-hunting process be more manageable for Illinois residents. This was a time when vaccines were in very short supply. Crucially, it was bilingual, and its volunteers centralized information to make appointments easily accessible to all who qualified. This site had about 9000 daily visitors and facilitated this life-saving Mitzvah. Oh yeah, the creator Eli is 13 years old. He said, "When appointments first opened up, I helped my grandparents and two dozen other people get appointments. After doing that I realized it was very, very difficult and there was no centralized info on availability and the state's listings didn't have availability." He saw a need and met the need by designing and coding the website himself. I'm captured by his beginning with himself - in this case, seeing that he could help his own grandparents get the vaccine - and then extending that love and those talents outward, to his literal neighbors, people who live in Illinois. He understands that we're all connected by our common origins, that we're all equal. That is part of *Ani Hashem* too.

Speaking of equal, people all over the world can agree that a wonderful feature of Zoom is the Camera Off button. This lets us not be visible for certain moments when we don't want to be seen. Then when we're ready, at our convenience, we turn the Zoom camera on. Amazing, right? But life is not like that. We can't push a button and behave in a way that betrays our character when nobody is watching. At least we shouldn't, teaches the Torah. We should live as if we are on Zoom and the Camera is always on. *Ani Hashem*, as Rashi says, means G-d is always watching.

Even when we are by ourselves, we are never alone.

Shabbat Shalom.