

The Crime of Ignorance (Vayikra)

Nothing in the world is more dangerous than sincere ignorance and conscientious stupidity. -Martin Luther King, Jr.

After the terror attacks of September 11, Admiral John Poindexter, former U.S. National Security Advisor under Ronald Reagan, formulated the concept of an “Information Awareness Program” to improve intelligence gathering from the general public. For a brief period, he led this new division within the Department of Defense. However, the idea of public surveillance triggered a media backlash, and Congress cut its funding about a year later.

Poindexter’s ill-fated initiative gave rise to at least two notable outcomes. The first is a slew of Hollywood movies and TV shows inspired by some version of his concept – either portraying a secret, benevolent, mass-intelligence-gathering organization, or more compellingly, a system gone awry through corruption, misguided idealism, or technological takeover – bringing the fears of “Big Brother” to life.

The second, and more relevant for our discussion, is the motto Poindexter promoted. According to a friend of mine in the intelligence community, Poindexter kept the phrase “Knowledge is Power” on his desk, which became the unofficial slogan of his division – rendered in Latin as *Scientia Est Potentia* (see ominous logo).

Scientia Potentia Est (“For also knowledge itself is power”) was first written by Francis Bacon in *Meditationes Sacrae* (1597). Bacon likely drew inspiration from our own *Mishlei* (Proverbs) 24:5:

“A wise man has great power, and a man of knowledge increases strength.”

If knowledge is power, then by contrast, ignorance must equal weakness or vulnerability.

Rabbi Ovadia Sforno, (1475–1549), takes the issue of ignorance even further.

Beginning in the book of Leviticus (Vayikra), the Torah delves deeply into the various sacrifices brought to the Temple. One particularly intriguing sacrifice is required for a sin that someone *might* have committed. Even if a person is uncertain whether they sinned, the Torah demands that this potential offender bring a sacrifice as an act of contrition and repentance.

Sforno explains that the problem lies not just in the uncertainty of having sinned, but in having placed oneself in such a situation to begin with. He accuses the individual

(whom the Torah still considers a sinner, regardless of whether the feared act occurred) of ignorance.

By failing to know the laws of the Torah, a person becomes more susceptible to transgression. According to Sforno, in Judaism, “I didn’t know” is not a valid excuse. Ignorance is not merely weakness or helplessness – ignorance is a crime.

May we constantly strive to cure our many areas of ignorance, especially in matters of Jewish law, and may our growing storehouses of knowledge always serve to keep us out of trouble.

Shabbat Shalom,

Ben-Tzion

Dedication

On the marriage of Shevi and Yisrael Meir Bernstein. Mazal Tov!