

## **CARTOON VILLAINS** **A Devotional Meditation on Ki Tetze (When You Go Out)**

Deuteronomy 21:10-25:19; Isaiah 54:1-10;  
Matthew 5:17-21, 27-28, 10:24-31; Mark 12:28-34; Luke 18:1-8; 2 Corinthians 3:2-6

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*Stereotypical caricature of a villain. Image by J.J., July 2003, via [Wikimedia Commons](#).*

We laugh at cartoon villains because their evil is written all over them. The masked bank robber and mustachioed arch criminal telegraph the intents of their hearts, which is obviously to make themselves rich at the expense of others. What got them to that point is immaterial; all we see and care about is that they are bad people who deserve what's coming to them. We have no need to fear them, as long as they stay on the movie screen, or in someone else's neighborhood.

But that's just the problem: such villains don't confine themselves to detective stories and Saturday morning cartoons. The stereotypes have basis in reality. There really are desperate people who rob banks and mug pedestrians, and there really are greedy landlords and loan sharks who soak up every penny they can get. They hurt people by depriving them of money, but the greater hurts come from the trauma they inflict, and sometimes from the blood they spill. Still, they are the stereotypical criminals – the cartoon villains whose disregard for law and order is easy to discern for those who have eyes to see.

It's the real villains who concern us the most. Those are the scary criminals. They don't flaunt the law; they hide behind it, shaping it to their own advantage. Such people maintain the appearance of goodness, and sometimes even of godliness, but their hearts are as cold as the most hardened drug lord. They don't murder with bullets and blades; they murder with smiles, kind words, and coins deposited in convenient pockets.

Who are these people? We might think immediately of corrupt political bosses, mafia dons, and religious charlatans. In a sense, though, they are also the cartoon villains. We expect such people to be corrupt. That's why we question what they say, and cringe whenever we have to trust them. We know it's going to hurt, but we go ahead in hope that we just might get something of what we need, just like that widow Yeshua talked about in her dealings with the unjust judge.

But there are other villains among us. They flaunt law and order just as flagrantly as the cartoon villains, but it's more difficult to detect them. That's because they are us. We are the ones who lecture a young man about his intentions toward our daughter, but carry out those same intentions with someone else's daughter, or wife, or sister, or fiancé. We don't have to go through with the act to be guilty. That's why our Messiah declared that anyone who looks lustfully at a woman has already committed adultery with her in his heart.

Or what about the nice old lady at church whom everyone loves, until they get to know her? It's not right to judge her for keeping a tight reign on her family. Who can say what

trauma she suffered to make her bitter, manipulative, and controlling? In her resolve to protect herself from further harm, she has become the same kind of abuser, but she masks it with smiles, kind words, and the best casserole at the church potluck. She practices a form of godliness, but as a means to get her way.

People like these have done nothing wrong, at least according to the surface standards of human decency. They haven't robbed banks, extorted money, stolen goods, kidnapped people, or knowingly violated city building codes. What they have done is far worse: they have kept the letter of the law, while twisting its spirit out of all recognition. But who is to know, except the One Who judges the thoughts and intentions of hearts? Thus, we keep our little secrets while going about our respectable lives as if nothing is wrong.

It's a funny thing about laws: they are made because someone has done something wrong. If people didn't drive recklessly, we wouldn't as many traffic laws, and if people were responsible with alcohol and other intoxicating substances, we wouldn't need laws regulating them and the behaviors they enable.

It's the same with God's laws. Jewish tradition counts 613 commandments in the Torah. Some are common sense requirements, such as making sure there's a safety railing around the roof of your house, or paying fair wages on time to your laborers. Others make little sense to us, such as how to treat a woman taken captive in war. That is, they make little sense until we think about German, Korean, Japanese, Filipino, and Native women who have become American war brides over the last two centuries.

It helps to think about the reasons God established all those laws, commandments, and instructions. Many exist because someone did something wrong. Regulations of marriage and family relations, for example, are there to prevent Israel from repeating the errors of Abraham and his descendants. Then there are laws about not sending your children through the fire to the gods of Canaan, and prohibiting both female and male prostitution. Those laws are connected, by the way, when you think about it. What better way to dispose of inconvenient infants than by declaring them the ancient equivalent of a charitable religious contribution? That way everyone's dignity is preserved, and there are no victims, or at least none that have a voice.

This line of thinking is dangerous. It gets us to the place of taking Yeshua seriously when He says things like,

Amen, I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or serif shall ever pass away from the *Torah* until all things come to pass. Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others the same, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven. But whoever keeps and teaches them, this one shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven.

Matthew 5:18-19 TLV

We know about the greatest commandments. Yeshua agreed with Jewish scholars of the day by saying they were the commands to love God and love our neighbors. The hard part is figuring out what it means to love God and love our neighbors, which is why we study those 613 commandments of the Torah, and the hundreds of others in the New

Testament. That tells us the letter of the law, or at least how the letter was articulated and lived out in ancient times. What is more difficult is understanding \the spirit of the law.

That's where the least of the commandments comes in. The rabbis say it's this one:

If there happens to be a bird's nest in front of you along the road, in any tree or on the ground, with young ones or eggs and the hen sitting on the young or on the eggs, you are not to take the hen with the young. You must certainly let the hen go, but the young you may take for yourself so that it may go well with you and you may prolong your days.

Deuteronomy 22:6-7 TLV

How remarkable. Our Creator cares so much about all the life He made that He regulates the way we deal with the little birds. And our Messiah says people are more valuable than many little birds.

That's why He doesn't want to see anyone subjected to trauma, humiliation, self-abasement, or any other harm. The way of life seeks the path out of such circumstances. Sometimes that path is filled with more trauma and pain before it reaches the realms of peace. Finding that path requires a heart ready to follow the spirit behind God's laws. That's the whole point of this New Covenant sealed in Messiah's blood. His intent is not to make us keep every law flawlessly, but to remake us from the inside out so that we live the principles on which He established His laws. It's our choice: we can follow that path and let Him complete His work, or we can maintain our outward appearance of goodness. We might fool other people if we go that way, but in God's eyes, we will still be cartoon villains.