



# Ohr Somayach Light Lines

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## Light Insight

given on Mount Sinai.

### *The Letter Of The Law*

**Y**ou can distinguish Judaism from other religions easily enough. Jews don't eat pork. They wear prayer-shawls. They light candles in Chanukah menorahs. When it comes to social justice, however, you might think there's not much difference between Judaism and other religions or systems of morality.

You'd be wrong. Although the Torah's code of social justice is superficially similar to other codes, there's an enormous difference.

That difference is exemplified by one letter in the Torah: a *vav*. (The letter *vav* at the beginning of a word means "and.")

The first words of this week's Parsha are "And these are the statutes..." Rashi explains that the reason our Parsha begins "And these..." rather than just "These..." is to connect this week's Parsha to last week's. In last week's Parsha we read about the giving of the Torah on Mount Sinai. Just as the laws of man's relationship with G-d were divinely given on Mount Sinai, so too were the laws of social justice of this week's parsha

For Jews, even the fundamental body of law governing social justice exists by Divine mandate from Sinai. For the rest of the world, these laws are based on civility and pragmatism.

In truth, no society can exist without some code of accepted behavior, but the difference in the origin of such law between the Torah and every other society is an enormous and fundamental one. No man-made system of laws can withstand the onslaught of a person's baser instincts. When push comes to shove, these laws go "out the window." Rivers of innocent blood have flowed in wars in every era, including our own, in spite of the fact that a prohibition against murder is a universally accepted tenet.

For a Jew, the essential imperative in social law is not moral, pragmatic or cultural; rather it is the Divine Will of G-d, no less than the commandment not to eat pork or to wear a prayer shawl.

That one letter, the *vav* that connects this week's Parsha and last week's, defines what gives the Torah's code of social justice its strength and durability over three thousand years after its institution - divine origin.

## *The Big Stick*

*"You shall not taunt or oppress a stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt." (Genesis 22:20)*

**A**ll bullies are cowards. When someone feels there's nobody to stop him from doing what he wants, he can become a tyrant. If there's someone standing over him waving a big stick, even a tyrant will think twice.

That's the connection between this command not to oppress a stranger and the Jewish People being strangers in the land of Egypt.

Pharaoh felt free to oppress the Jewish People because he thought there was no one to stand up for them. No Big Stick. He rejected the omnipotent existence of G-d and His protection of the Jewish People.

Similarly, when someone oppresses a stranger or a newcomer, he is tacitly implying that they are "fair game." Nobody's going to stand up for them. Thus he, in his own way, is denying the G-d who hears the cry of the poor and the downtrodden, and who answers.

## THE OTHER SIDE OF THE STORY

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Giving people the benefit of the doubt

Two friends left the synagogue after prayers one Shabbat, with words only of praise for the members of their congregation, such wonderful, pious Jews. Soon they walked past a well known outdoor cafe, and recognized a member of the congregation, sitting in the cafe, eating a sandwich. Such a pious man, eating in a cafe on Shabbat? He must have forgotten the day! "We better warn him!" the first exclaimed. But when he

spoke to the seated man, he only replied, "I know it," and went on eating. Then the other noticed it was a ham sandwich, and thought, "He can't realize what he's doing, such an honorable, religious man! And so he warned him the food was not kosher. But he said, "I know it," and went on eating. Nothing they could do would stop him, so they turned, and walked on down the street.

"What a wonderful, holy congregation we have." said the one, and his friend agreed. "Yes," the other replied, "such a magnificent congregation. Nobody in our shul could ever tell a lie."

## Response Line

### In G-d We Trust, All Others Pay Cash

Steve Weiss Wrote:

*Do you know if there is any truth to the following article that I read? A couple of years ago, at West Point, there was a display about Hyam Salomon and the Revolutionary War. He died penniless, having used all his resources to aid the newly formed and poorly supplied American "army." The following story is told about him:*

*General Washington's financial advisor and assistant was a Jewish man by the name of Hyam Salomon. During the cold winter of Valley Forge when American soldiers were freezing and running out of food, it was Hyam who marshaled Jews in America and Europe to provide money in relief aid to these stranded American troops and turned the course of history. Without this help, our "army" would have perished before they could have defeated the British. If you take a one dollar bill*

*out of your pocket and look at the back at the Eagle, the stars above the Eagle's head are in the six point Star of David to honor Jews. If you turn the Eagle upside down you will see a configuration in the likeness of a Menorah... both at the insistence of George Washington who said we should never forget the Jewish people."*

Dear Steve,

The small Jewish community in colonial America gave more than their share toward the United States' revolutionary cause. One such patriot was indeed Hyam Salomon, who gave \$300,000, an immense fortune for those days.

I doubt, though, that the Great Seal of the United States which appears on the dollar bill makes any hint to Salomon's contribution, or that George Washington had anything to say about it.

The first bill to bear this symbol was the \$1 Silver Certificate, Series 1935, long after Washington's death.

The "Great Seal" itself was commissioned by Congress in 1776 and adopted six years later, but during this time George Washington was busy fighting the war. The designing committee, which included Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson and John Adams, did not include Washington. Nor did Washington become president until seven years after this seal had been adopted, so it's questionable that he would have had any input.

The thirteen stars, representing the 13 original states, do indeed form the Star of David (also known as "Solomon's seal"). Exactly why, I don't know. In general, though, it's clear that Franklin and Jefferson had a "biblical" motif in mind, as their original draft of the Great Seal showed "rays from a Pillar of Fire in the Cloud, expressive of the divine Presence and Command, beaming on Moses."

But don't worry. Hyam Salomon wasn't forgotten. In 1893, a bill was presented before the 52nd Congress ordering a gold medal struck off in recognition of Salomon's contributions to the United States.