

Overview

The Jewish People receive a series of laws concerning social justice. Topics include: Proper treatment of Jewish servants; a husband's obligations to his wife; penalties for hitting people and cursing parents, judges, and leaders; financial responsibilities for damaging people or their property, either by oneself or by one's animate or inanimate property, or by pitfalls that one created; payments for theft; not returning an object that one accepted responsibility to guard; the right to self-defense for a person being robbed.

Other topics include: Prohibitions against seduction; practicing witchcraft, bestiality and sacrifices to idols. The Torah warns us to treat the convert, widow and orphan with dignity, and to avoid lying. Lending and usury is forbidden and the rights over collateral are limited. Payment of obligations to the Temple should not be delayed, and the Jewish People must be Holy, even concerning food. The Torah teaches the proper conduct for judges in court proceedings. The commandments of Shabbos and the Sabbatical year are outlined. Three times a year — Pesach, Shavuot and Succos — we are told to come to the Temple. The Torah concludes this listing of laws with a law of kashrus — not to mix milk and meat. Hashem promises that He will lead the Jewish People to the Land of Israel, helping them conquer the nations that live there, and tells them that by fulfilling His commandments they will bring blessings to their nation. The people promise to do and listen to everything that Hashem says. Moshe writes the Book of the Covenant, and reads it to the people. Moshe ascends the mountain for 40 days in order to receive the two Tablets of the Covenant.

Insights

THE TEARS OF A CLOWN

“If you encounter an ox of your enemy or his donkey wandering, you shall return it to him repeatedly.” (23:4)

It was the thick of night.

Reb Beryl, a Chassidic Jew, knocked on the door of the inn. The bitter cold was gnawing at his knuckles. There was no reply. He knocked again. After what seemed like an eternity, he heard the sound of rusty bolts sliding back.

The bleary eyes of the innkeeper peered out into the darkness. He held his lantern out to discern who was awakening the dead at this unholy hour.

“Do you have a room?” said Reb Beryl.

“We’re full up,” came the testy reply.

“But you must have *somewhere* for me to sleep.”

“Look. All the rooms are full. The circus is in town. There isn’t a spare bed in the inn. The only thing is ... You could share a bed with the clown. It’s up to you. Take it or leave it.”

“I’ll take it,” said Reb Beryl. “And please, could you wake me up before dawn. Tomorrow I have a long way to travel.”

“Maybe you’d like breakfast in bed as well?”

Reb Beryl was silent.

“Very well,” the innkeeper said begrudgingly.

Reb Beryl made his way to his room and undressed, carefully hanging his clothes on a peg next to the clown’s outfit.

At four-thirty, the innkeeper knocked on his door. Reb Beryl roused himself from his reverie. With half-closed eyes, he dragged himself from the bed, dressed and made his way into the pre-dawn light.

About an hour later, when the day had fully dawned, Reb Beryl was walking through the main street of the village. Suddenly, a villager pointed at him and burst into gales of laughter. “What’s so funny?” he thought to himself. When he came across the next person and a third and a fourth, and they all exploded in laughter in exactly the same way, he started to frown. “Am I in a town of lunatics?”

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Just then, he walked past a shop with a large plate-glass window. He saw his reflection in the window. Frozen in disbelief, he stared at his reflection.

Staring back at him was a Jew with long side-locks and beard, dressed in red satin pajamas with three enormous white pompoms down his front. A clown's suit.

"That fool of an innkeeper!" said Reb Beryl. "He woke up the clown instead of me!"

Today, the Jewish people are beset with an identity crisis of staggering proportions.

Who are we?

Are we the children of Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov, the receivers of a Torah which binds us to an everlasting covenant? Or are we nothing more than a loose quasi-ethnic affiliation with *carte blanche* to redefine Judaism at will?

Our largest single concern is Jewish Continuity. The problem is: What are we continuing? We have lost the clarity of our grandparents and their forbears who knew what Judaism was. Even when they *rejected* Judaism, at least they had an idea what it was they were rejecting.

"If you encounter an ox of your enemy or his donkey wandering, you shall return it to him repeatedly."

If the Torah shows such concern for the welfare of someone's property, commanding us to go out of our way to return his animal even a hundred times over, all the more so must we be concerned **to return a person to himself**. We must do whatever we can to reach out to our brothers and sisters who have little or no idea what it means to be Jewish, to show them the beauty and depth of the Torah.

The greatest distance is when there is no sense of the distance. You are farthest lost when you have no idea that you are even lost — with no desire to go back home, because you think *you are at home*.

For those of us who can be shepherds, it is a tremendous mitzvah to inspire the Jewish community with a genuine self-awareness and continuity.

For behind the greasepaint smile, lie the tears of a clown.

THE LETTER OF THE LAW

"And these are the statutes... " (23:9)

You can distinguish Judaism from other religions easily enough. Jews don't eat pork. They wear prayer-shawls. But when it comes to social justice, you might think there's not a large difference between Judaism and other religions or systems of morality.

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

And that difference lies in one Hebrew letter: *Vav*. (The letter *vav* at the beginning of a word means "and.")

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. Just as the laws of man's relationship with Hashem come from Sinai, so too the laws of social justice come from Sinai.

In Judaism, even the laws of social justice are by Divine mandate from Sinai. In the rest of the world, they are based on civility and pragmatism. No society can exist without some code of acceptable behavior, but the difference between the Torah and every other system of laws is enormous and fundamental. No man-made law can withstand the onslaught of a person's baser instincts. In times of trial and test, 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 "*You shall not 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 Will of Hashem, no less than not eating pork or wearing a prayer shawl.

This is what gives the Torah's code of social justice power and durability thousands of years after its institution.

THE BIG STICK

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

All bullies are cowards.

When someone feels there's nobody to stop him doing what he wants, he can become a tyrant. If there's someone waving a big stick, he'll 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 Hashem and His protection of the Jewish People.

Similarly, when someone oppresses a stranger or a convert, 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 convert, the widowed and the orphaned.

Haftorah for Parshas Shekalim: Melachim II Chapter 11

In the months of Shevat, Adar and Nissan, we read four special passages of the Torah. Each is accompanied by its own special Haftorah. The Torah portions are to help us prepare for Purim and ultimately for Pesach. The four passages are: **Parshas Shekalim** which deals with the collection of the compulsory half-shekel for offerings in the *Beis Hamikdash*; **Parshas Zachor** to remember the mitzvah of eradicating the memory of Amalek who attacked the Jewish People after the Exodus from Egypt; **Parshas Parah** which details the laws of how a person can purify himself from the spiritual impurity resulting from contact with the dead; **Parshas HaChodesh**, the mitzvah of the sanctification of the new moon.

WHEN ½ IS GREATER THAN 10,000

The Midrash (*Eliyahu Rabbah*) tells us that Hashem knew that in the month of Adar, Haman would offer Achashverosh, king of Persia, 10,000 *kikar* of silver if he would agree to the genocide of the Jewish People.

Thus, "in anticipation" of Haman's plan, Hashem gave the Jewish People the merit of the mitzvah of the half-shekel donation to the *Beis Hamikdash* a thousand years before Haman's plot.

It was this half-shekel, given in the service of the Creator, which outweighed Haman's 10,000 *kikar* of silver, and led to the salvation of the Jewish People in the time of Purim.

WHEN ½ IS LESS THAN 100%

Why was it that specifically a half-shekel was given, and not a whole shekel?

A Jew must understand that alone, he is only half the picture. Without his attachment to the community, he can never reach a state of completeness. A Jew has to look at himself as a "half-shekel." He only becomes whole when he links himself to the body of the Jewish People.

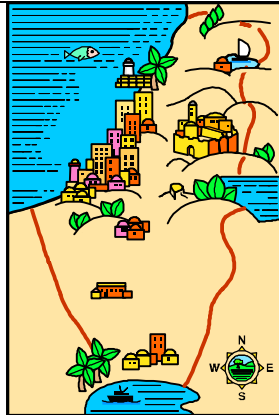
Sources:

The Tears Of A Clown - The Chafetz Chaim, Rabbi Mendel Weinbach

The Letter Of The Law - Rabbi Shlomo Yosef Zevin
The Big Stick - The Ramban

LOVE OF THE LAND

Selections from classical Torah sources which express the special relationship between the People of Israel and Eretz Yisrael



A SHARE IN THE LAND

Why does the Torah (Bereishis 33:19) bother to inform us that Yaakov purchased the plot of land in Shechem where he pitched his tent, and how much he paid for it?

This is to reveal to us the importance of Eretz Yisrael. A share in Eretz Yisrael is considered as valuable as a share in the World to Come.

Rabbi Avraham Ibn Ezra, Commentary on the Torah

Parshas Mishpatim

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