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Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS ZT"L

Covenant & Conversation

In the opening phrase of Mishpatim -- "And these are the laws you are to set before them" -- Rashi comments: "'And these are the laws' -- Wherever uses the word 'these' it signals a discontinuity with what has been stated previously. Wherever it uses the term 'and these' it signals a continuity. Just as the former commands were given at Sinai, so these were given at Sinai. Why then are the civil laws placed in juxtaposition to the laws concerning the altar? To tell you to place the Sanhedrin near to the Temple. 'Which you shall set before them' -- God said to Moses: You should not think, I will teach them a section or law two or three times until they know the words verbatim but I will not take the trouble to make them understand the reason and its significance. Therefore the Torah states 'which you shall set before them' like a fully laid table with everything ready for eating." (Rashi on Shemot 23:1)

Three remarkable propositions are being set out here, which have shaped the contours of Judaism ever since.

The first is that just as the general principles of Judaism (aseret hadibrot means not "ten commandments" but "ten utterances" or overarching principles) are Divine, so are the details. In the 1960s the Danish architect Arne Jacobson designed a new college campus in Oxford. Not content with designing the building, he went on to design the cutlery and crockery to be used in the dining hall, and supervised the planting of every shrub in the college garden. When asked why, he replied in the words of another architect, Mies van der Rohe: "God is in the details".

That is a Jewish sentiment. There are those who believe that what is holy in Judaism is its broad vision, never so compellingly expressed as in the Decalogue at Sinai. The truth however is that God is in the details: "Just as the former were given at Sinai, so these were given at Sinai." The greatness of Judaism is not simply in its noble vision of a free, just and compassionate society, but in the way it brings this vision down to earth in detailed legislation. Freedom is more than an abstract idea. It means (in an age in which slavery was taken for granted -- it was not abolished in Britain or the United States until the nineteenth century) letting a slave go free after seven years, or immediately if his master has injured him. It means granting slaves complete rest and freedom one day in seven. These laws do not abolish slavery, but they do create the conditions under which people will eventually learn to abolish it. Not less importantly, they turn slavery from an existential fate to a temporary condition. Slavery is not what you are or how you were born, but some thing that has happened to you for a while and from which you will one day be liberated. That is what these laws -- especially the law of Shabbat -- achieve, not in theory only, but in living practice. In this, as in virtually every other aspect of Judaism, God is in the details.

The second principle, no less fundamental, is that civil law is not secular law. We do not believe in the idea "render to Caesar what is Caeser's and to God what belongs to God". We believe in the separation of powers but not in the secularisation of law or the spiritualisation of faith. The Sanhedrin or Supreme Court must be placed near the Temple to teach that law itself must be driven by a religious vision. The greatest of these visions, stated in this week's sedra, is: "Do not oppress a stranger, because you yourself know how it feels like to be a stranger: you were strangers in Egypt." (Shemot 23:9)

The Jewish vision of justice, given its detailed articulation here for the first time, is based not on expediency or pragmatism, nor even on abstract philosophical principles, but on the concrete historical memories of the Jewish people as "one nation under God." Centuries earlier, God has chosen Abraham so that he would "teach his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord, by doing what is right and just." (Bereishith 18:19) Justice in Judaism flows from the experience of injustice at the hands of the Egyptians, and the God-given challenge to create a radically different form of society in Israel.

This is already foreshadowed in the first chapter of the Torah with its statement of the equal and absolute dignity of the human person as the image of God. That is why society must be based on the rule of law, impartially administered, treating all alike -- "Do not follow the crowd in doing wrong. When you give testimony in a lawsuit, do not pervert justice by siding

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with the crowd, and do not show favouritism to a poor man in his lawsuit." (Shemot 23:2-3)

To be sure, at the highest levels of mysticism, God is to be found in the innermost depths of the human soul, but God is equally to be found in the public square and in the structures of society: the marketplace, the corridors of power, and courts of law. There must be no gap, no dissociation of sensibilities, between the court of justice (the meeting-place of man and man) and the Temple (the meeting-place of man and God).

The third principle and the most remarkable of all is the idea that law does not belong to lawyers. It is the heritage of every Jew. "Do not think, I will teach them a section or law two or three times until they know the words verbatim but I will not take the trouble to make them understand the reason and significance of the law. The Torah states 'which you shall set before them' like a fully laid table with everything ready for eating." This is the origin of the name of the most famous of all Jewish codes of law, R. Joseph Karo's Shulkhan Arukh.

From earliest times, Judaism expected everyone to know and understand the law. Legal knowledge is not the closely guarded property of an elite. It is -- in the famous phrase -- "the heritage of the congregation of Jacob." (Devarim 33:4) Already in the first century CE Josephus could write that "should any one of our nation be asked about our laws, he will repeat them as readily as his own name. The result of our thorough education in our laws from the very dawn of intelligence is that they are, as it were, engraved on our souls. Hence to break them is rare, and no one can evade punishment by the excuse of ignorance" (Contra Apionem, ii, 177-8). That is why there are so many Jewish lawyers. Judaism is a religion of law -- not because it does not believe in love ("You shall love the Lord your God", "You shall love your neighbour as yourself") but because, without justice, neither love nor liberty nor human life itself can flourish. Love alone does not free a slave from his or her chains.

The sedra of Mishpatim, with its detailed rules and regulations, can sometimes seem a let-down after the breathtaking grandeur of the revelation at Sinai. It should not be. Yitro contains the vision, but God is in the details. Without the vision, law is blind. But without the details, the vision floats in heaven. With them the divine presence is brought down to earth, where we need it most. *Covenant and Conversation is kindly sponsored by the Schimmel Family in loving memory of Harry (Chaim) Schimmel zt"l*

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

"And if two men strive together, and hurt a woman, causing her to miscarry, and there is no fatal harm, he shall surely be fined…But if fatal injury [to the mother] follows, then you shall give life for life." (Exodus 21:22–23) Mishpatim contains the first commandment in the Torah which brings up the personal status of a fetus. A woman who miscarries as result of being accidentally injured by two men fighting amongst themselves is awarded a monetary compensation for the unborn child, but if the injury proves fatal to the woman, the death penalty is to be invoked.

The rabbis gleaned from these two cases that a fetus was not considered a life. The basis for this interpretation is found in a Mishnaic ruling on the question of a life-threatening pregnancy: "If a woman suffers a difficult childbirth, we are allowed to destroy the fetus in the woman, removing the fetus limb by limb, because the mother's life takes precedence over the child's. But if the head [or major portion of the body] of the child has emerged, the newborn cannot be harmed because one life cannot push aside another life." (Mishna Ohalot 7:6)

From the Mishnaic perspective, life or ensoulment takes place at birth – not from conception, as the Catholics, for example, believe.

This view, however, which seems to look upon the fetus as less than life, is not the only one we find among the sages. In the Talmud (Arakhin 7a–b), R. Nachman reports in the name of Shmuel that if a pregnant woman dies on Shabbat before giving birth, we do everything necessary to save the fetus, even if it means desecrating Shabbat.

Keeping in mind the overriding principle that Shabbat may only be desecrated to save a life, it is clear that the life at stake cannot be the mother's because she has already died. Therefore, R. Nachman's ruling means that Shabbat may be desecrated for the life of a fetus.

With our aforementioned verse from Exodus and the mishna in Ohalot, is it appropriate to call a fetus a full-fledged life, with the protective rights entitled to all human beings?

One of Maimonides' rulings sheds light on the nature of the fetus and can orchestrate between the various sources already cited. We must take note that this abortion law appears in a section of the Mishneh Torah entitled Laws of Murder (1:9). In codifying the law that the mother's life takes precedence over the fetus as long as the fetus is inside the womb – although once the head has emerged, one life is not pushed aside for another life – Maimonides adds an explanation. We are obligated to destroy the fetus when the mother's life is threatened because the fetus is considered a rodef, a pursuer; in effect, a murderer.

The fetus is threatening the life of the mother.

Earlier in this chapter of the Laws of Murder, Maimonides rules that if we come upon a rodef (a potential murderer clutching a knife in hot pursuit of someone in desperate flight), we are obligated to do whatever it takes to stop the pursuer, even if it means killing them. Halakha 9, dealing with abortion, continues the question of the rodef, this time extending the concept to include the fetus.

Maimonides, having placed the laws of abortion within the category of the laws of murder, and then having offered the analogy of the fetus to a legal position of rodef requiring destruction, provides a fascinating approach towards understanding the complex laws of the fetus. A number of commentaries, including Rabbi Haim Soleveitchik of Brisk in his commentary on Maimonides' Mishneh Torah, reasoned that if the fetus would be merely considered part of the mother's body, more like an extension, a limb or an organ, there would be a question as to the permissibility of amputating a "limb" to save the mother's life, and therefore we would not have to come up with the description of the fetus as a "pursuer."

Maimonides' rodef analogy, it is argued, renders unto the fetus an existence of its own which goes beyond the idea of its simply being part of the mother. The fetus may not be life (in accordance with the biblical account in Mishpatim and the mishna in Ohalot), but it assuredly is potential life, and potential life dare not be snuffed out capriciously. Shabbat can be desecrated to preserve potential life, and the mother's life must be endangered before we can destroy the fetus.

The laws concerning suicide may illuminate the question of the mother's individual freedom and "right" when it comes to determining the fate of what she is carrying inside her womb. The sages (Bava Kama 91b) consider suicide a major crime, indeed an act of homicide, based on a verse in the portion of Noach: "But the blood of your own lives will I demand an account… He who spills human blood shall have his own blood spilled by man…" (Genesis 9:5–6).

Suicide, in the Torah's view, is murder, and one doing the killing cannot use the argument that one has the right to do with one's life as one sees fit, even if it means ending it. We do not own our lives; we are simply the keepers of these bodies, a task to be performed as best we can, with the expiration date being God's choice, not ours. Similarly, though the fetus may be part of the mother during the period of its origin, that does not mean she owns the potential life developing within her womb, and that she is free to dispose of it whenever whim, will or fancy strike her.

Treating a human life seriously means that we have to treat potential human life seriously as well. If the mother is forbidden to destroy her "own" life, then how can she destroy "life" that is not her own?

In Judaism, what determines the future of the fetus is its potential for being dangerous. If it "pursues" the mother, threatening her life, then the fetus must be destroyed, for actual life does take precedence over potential life. To be sure, there may be a legitimate difference of opinion as to what falls into the category of life-threatening. According to many religio-legal authorities, the halakha recognizes not only physical danger to the mother's body, but also psychological danger to the mother's state of mind, each case to be judged on its own merits by rabbinic and medical counseling. Furthermore, there are also authorities who distinguish the first forty days, or consider the first trimester versus the last six months in the life of the embryo, or distinguish between an embryo with potential life and one with only potential limited life, such as one carrying Tay-Sachs disease. In all such instances, a competent religio-legal authority must be consulted. However, when no mitigating circumstances exist, and the proposed abortion proves to be only a desire to get rid of a financial or emotional inconvenience, Jewish law questions such decisions and clearly forbids the taking of potential life.

One of the most moving experiences I ever had in the rabbinate involved a couple who had been married for years without being blessed with children. Finally, the woman did give birth, but the baby was born with a devastating disease, and died soon afterwards.

During the week of shiva, a congregant asked me to speak to a relative of his – all of 15 years old – who had gotten pregnant by her boyfriend and was about to go through an abortion. The young mother-to-be agreed to meet, and during the course of our talk, she became convinced that it was a mistake to abort the fetus, and that it would be better to give the baby up for adoption once it was born, specifically to this family that had just suffered the tragic loss of their own baby.

It is not very difficult to imagine how we all felt at the bat-mitzva celebration of this young woman who had been snatched from the abortionist's knife and is today an outstanding Torah student at one of the finest religious girls' high schools in Israel. According to Jewish tradition, a life saved is a world saved; therefore, it stands to reason that every potential life is nothing less than a potential world. *The above article appears in Rabbi Riskin's book Shemot: Defining a Nation, part of his Torah Lights series of commentaries on the weekly parsha, published by Maggid and available for purchase at bit.ly/RiskinShemot.*

RABBI BEREL WEIN ZT"L

Wein Online

The Torah follows its exhilarating and inspirational description of the revelation at Mount Sinai with a rather dry and detailed set of various laws that are to be followed by the people of Israel. It is one thing to be inspired and thus acquire great ideals. It is another thing completely to be able to transfer those ideals and inspiration into everyday life on a regular basis.

We are all aware that the devil is always in the details. It is natural to agree that one should not steal or murder. But what is really the definition of stealing? Is taking something that originally did not belong to you always considered stealing? How about grabbing my neighbor's rope and using it to save a drowning person? Is that also stealing? Is self-defense murder? Are court-

imposed death penalties murder?

How do we deal with such complex moral issues? This is really the crux of all halacha and this week's parsha serves as our introduction to the concepts of Jewish law. Without an understanding of the practice of halacha, the great ideals and inspiration of the Torah are almost rendered meaningless and unachievable.

The Torah concentrates not only on great ideas but on small details as well. From these small details spring forth the realization of great ideals, and the ability to make them of practical value and use in everyday life. Hence the intimate connection between this week's parsha and the revelation at Mount Sinai discussed in last week's parsha. There is a natural and necessary continuity in the narrative flow of these two parshiyot of the Torah.

I think that this idea is borne out by the famous statement of the Jewish people when asked if they wished to accept the Torah. In this week's parsha their answer is recorded as: "We will do, and we will listen." All commentators and the Talmud comments upon the apparently reverse order of this statement. People usually listen for instructions before they "do." But the simple answer is that the people of Israel realized that listening alone will be insufficient.

The great and holy generalities of the Torah are valid only if they are clearly defined, detailed and placed into everyday life activities. We have to "do" in order to be able to "listen" and understand the Torah's guidance and wishes fully. The Talmud records that a non-Jew once told a rabbi that the Jews were a "hasty and impulsive people" in accepting the Torah without first checking out its contents. In reality that holy hastiness of Israel was a considered and mature understanding that a Torah of ideas and inspiration alone without a practical guide to life would not last over the centuries of Jewish history.

Only those who are willing to "do" and who know what to "do" will eventually appreciate intellectually and emotionally the greatness of Torah. Only then will they be able to truly "listen" and appreciate the great gift that the Lord has bestowed upon Israel – the eternal and holy Torah.

RABBI JONATHAN GEWIRTZ

Migdal Ohr

"If fire shall go out and find thorns, and consume sheaves or standing grain, or the field, the one who lit the fire shall surely pay." (Shemos 22:5) Parshas Mishpatim, teaches many laws of damages between people and property. In this case, a fellow wanted to clear thorns and brush from his property, so he lit a fire. However, the fire got out of hand, ignited other thorns outside his property, and led to a destructive force that damaged another's field. Because of this, he is liable.

The verse seems rather specific, though, in specifying that thorns were the catalysts for the fire. Why couldn't the fire simply go out and "find" sheaves or grain? Why does the Torah postulate it was thorns which brought about the fire?

It's possible to explain that though the person wasn't derelict in lighting the fire close to another field or grain, he was cavalier about the presence of the thorns, which have little to no value, but are prime sources of kindling. He should have been more careful. Especially since dry thorns are quick to light, this should have been on his mind.

The Ohr HaChaim sees in this reference an allusion to the wicked people in the world, who are thorns in the sides of others, and their wickedness is inflammatory. We must awaken from our slumbers and see the dangers of these people, and avoid associating with them or getting caught up in their evil behavior. And this is not the first time thorns and fire are juxtaposed together.

At the beginning of Sefer Shmos, when Hashem appears to Moshe, it is in a burning thornbush. Some say it's because it is low and Hashem is with Klal Yisrael in its suffering. However, the Kli Yakar there says this is a reference to the wicked amongst the Jews.

Why, he asks, do the Jews suffer more than any other nation? Because of the internal detractors among us who constantly snap and find fault with each other. The hatred and jealousy of our people against ourselves, finding fault with others and acting wickedly, is the reason for our long, bitter exile. The crackling of the thorns burning in a fire are reminiscent of the sharp reports and staccato sounds of Jews fighting with each other.

In this case, the fellow who lit a fire was unworried about the thorns around his property. He overlooked them and didn't consider them important. In the end, he was able to see how much damage they did to the good crops, alluding to the righteous people and the prosperity of Klal Yisrael.

Therefore, the Torah specifies that the fire found thorns and lit the sheaves on fire, destroying the fertile field, to draw our attention to the potential dangers of infighting and discord. A fire that harms someone else can easily get out of hand, so we must be ever on our guard to eradicate the thorns and prevent those small but painful intrusions from creating larger problems.

R' Levi Yitzchak of Berditchov was renowned for his love of his fellow Jews. Even when he found a seeming shortcoming, he used his love of others to find good in it, and often made his way into the hearts of even the worst of sinners.

Once, a man approached him and said, "It says in the Shema that if we don't listen to G-d's words and fulfill his mitzvos, He will be angry with us, withhold the

rain and destroy us. I am a sinner with no regret, yet I am successful, wealthy, and happy!"

R' Levi Yitzchak replied, "My child, the only way you could have known that is if you had read the Shema. I can tell you that the reward for reciting Shema even once is so great that not even all the wealth in the world could compensate for it." © 2026 Rabbi J. Gewirtz & Migdal Ohr

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Fire

Translated by Rabbi Mordechai Weiss

"When a fire is started and spreads . . . the one who started the fire must make restitution" (*Shemot* 22:5). A number of scenarios can result in fire causing damage. In the three cases discussed below, the person lighting the fire or fanning the flame is responsible for the damage done.

1. A person lights a fire on his own property, and it spreads beyond the fence enclosing his property and damages his neighbor's property. The fence could not have been expected to stop the fire.

2. A person lights a fire on his own property and there is a fence which should have been able to stop the fire, but unfortunately did not.

3. A fire was already burning on a neighbor's property. Someone fanned the flames and the fire spread, ultimately destroying the neighbor's property.

Rav Yochanan and Resh Lakish disagree on the reason a person is liable if he starts a fire which causes damage.

Rav Yochanan states that he is liable because "his fire is like his arrows" (*isho mishum chitzav*). Someone who shoots an arrow is accountable for any damage the arrow does. Similarly, a person who starts a fire is accountable for any damage his fire causes. If this is correct, though, in Case 2 the person should be exempt. The fact that the fence should have stopped the spread of the fire should be the equivalent of his arrows having come to rest (*kalu lo chitzav*), at which point he is exempt from damages.

Resh Lakish disagrees. He maintains that fire cannot be compared to an arrow, because fire can spread on its own. Rather, the reason the fire-setter is liable is that just as a person is responsible for damage done by something he owns (like his ox), so too he is responsible for damage done by a fire he set. In other words, "his fire is like his property" (*isho mishum mammono*). If this is correct, though, then in Case 3 the person should be exempt since he did not set the fire. We can resolve this problem if we assume that it is the additional fire (which he caused by fanning the flames) which is considered his property that caused damage.

This disagreement is not absolute. For in some instances, Rav Yochanan agrees that one can become liable because the fire is deemed his property. For example, in Case 2, although *isho mishum chitzav* might not apply, the person is still responsible because *isho mishum mammono* applies.

If this is so, would Rav Yochanan assert that a person is liable if he fanned the flames of someone else's fire, which then spread beyond a fence that should have been able to stop it? Commentators disagree. Some say that if neither *mammono* nor *chitzav* can apply, Rav Yochanan would exempt the person from liability. *© 2017 Rabbi M. Weiss and Encyclopedia Talmudit*

RABBI DAVID LEVIN

Damage

The opening Mishnah of Tractate Baba Kama deals with the four types of damages that are covered in this week's parasha, Parashat Mishpatim. The Mishnah begins, "There are four primary damagers: (1) Hashor, the ox, (2) Habor, the pit, (3) Hamav'eh, leading one's animal into another's field where that animal grazes or damages the property, and (4) Hamaveir, fire. Since Parashat Mishpatim discusses damages caused by Man to his Fellowman, this section of the Torah discusses the major categories of damage (listed above) and the restitution paid for each damage. In a previous lesson we discussed the category of Hashor, the ox. Now, we will tackle the second category, Habor, the pit.

The Torah states, "When a man will open a pit, or when a man will dig a pit and not cover it, and an ox or a donkey fall into it, the owner of the pit shall make restitution; he shall return money to its owner, and the dead body (of the animal) shall be his." HaRav Shamshon Raphael Hirsch explains that the Torah speaks of both opening and closing (covering) a pit and does not dwell on the ownership of the pit or even whether the pit appears to have an official owner. HaRav Hirsch explains that it is not important whether he dug the pit or whether it was there already when he bought the land. Certainly, if he digs or uncovers a pit in the public thoroughfare, he is responsible for any damage the open pit might cause. "In mentioning the two ways in which the defendant may be connected with the pit, it is quite evident that it is not as possessor but as causer of the danger that he is made responsible."

One of the laws involved with a pit is that the pit must be ten tefachim (handbreadths) deep for the person responsible for the open pit to be liable for any penalty, as the pit's depth could now cause the death of any animal that fell inside it. HaRav Zalman Sorotzkin explains that we would naturally assume that if a person who opened (uncovered) a pit was liable, then certainly the person who dug the pit was liable. He explains, however, that this might not be so. If a person dug a pit that was only nine tefachim deep, but another man dug the pit one tefach deeper, the first digger is not liable at all, but the one who dug only one tefach, but made the pit now liable for a penalty, he has the total liability as if he had dug all ten tefachim by himself.

Rashi explains that the public domain cannot be

owned by any individual, as it is public, but if a person digs a pit or places an obstacle in the public domain, even though he is technically not the owner of the pit, he is considered to be the owner and liable for any damage it causes. The Ramban explains that if the "owner" of the pit dies, his inheritors are liable for the damage even though they were not directly involved. It is also their responsibility to cover the pit or to fill it in so that they will not be held liable for any future damage.

The Torah states: "he shall return money to its owner, and the dead body (of the animal) shall be his." When the Torah states that the owner of the pit should return money to the owner of the animal, there are several steps involved. According to Rashi, he need not return money, but, instead, the equivalent of that value in anything he owns, even bran. The Ramban explains Rashi's statement to say that the value of the carcass is first determined, and the carcass' value is compared to the value of that same animal if it were alive. The carcass is then given to the damaged party, and the equivalent of the difference between a live animal and its dead carcass is added to the carcass as restitution. The Ramban adds to Rashi's explanation because he believed that Rashi's explanation needed clarification.

The Ramban explains: "For there is no need for Scripture to tell us concerning this carcass that the one who suffered the damage must take it in part payment, when he brings it before the court to collect his damage; for even if the one who caused the damage had other carcasses that were carrion, or flesh that was treifah (any animal suffering from a serious organic disease, whose meat is forbidden even if ritually slaughtered) in his possession, he can give it to him in part payment, it being already established (in Tractate Baba Kamma, 7a) that restitution for damages need not be in money, but may 'include anything of value; even bran.'" The one whose animal was damaged immediately takes possession of that damaged animal, so that if the value decreases or the animal carcass is stolen before he can use it, the owner of the pit will only have to pay the value of the carcass at the time of death.

One might wonder what happens with the carcass after the difference between the live animal and the dead carcass is determined and paid. It is the responsibility of the animal's owner to raise the carcass from the pit, since the carcass will be his. The Ramban states that one could be confused by the language, "he shall return money to its owner, and the dead body (of the animal) shall be his." One could read the last part of the phrase to indicate that the one who caused the damage gets the dead carcass. He explains that even if we interpret the phrase to give the carcass to the one who caused the damage, that "gift" is only so that he may use the carcass as payment together with the difference between the live animal and its carcass to make full restitution to the original owner of the animal.

HaRav Hirsch also deals with the concept of grama, indirect causality. "If the hole had only brought about a fall, the animal had not fallen into it, but stumbled over it and fell after the pit and not into it, the owner, or causer of the danger, is not held responsible." The owner of the pit only pays for damage caused directly by the pit (falling into it) but not what it indirectly causes. The animal fell and died on regular land which is not considered to be dangerous inherently. Even though the bottom of the pit itself is not dangerous either, the fact that the pit was made at least ten handbreadths deep changes the land at the bottom of the pit into a hazard. The same hazard would apply if someone made a pile in the public domain which was ten handbreadths high. It is not the land which is a hazard but the creation of a deep drop which becomes a danger.

While Habor, the pit is only one of the categories of damages, we learn from it the necessity of preventing damages to other people and their possessions. We also see that one must take responsibility for those damages if one has not taken the proper measures to prevent them from occurring. May we learn to constantly take into consideration the possible damage our actions can bring on others so that we may strive to avoid any harm.

RABBI YITZCHAK ZWEIG

Shabbat Shalom Weekly

This week I was in synagogue when someone disrupted the prayer service because, in his view, he had a public service announcement to make. He went on to speak for a couple of minutes, which resulted in prematurely ending the service. When questioned afterwards about why he did what he did, he gave some version of "the ends justify the means."

Unfortunately, this sort of self-righteous attitude is not as uncommon as it should be in the religious community. Time and time again, I have seen individuals double park on a major thoroughfare completely blocking one lane because they "just had to run into the store for one minute to pick up their challahs before Shabbat." The fact that they inconvenienced scores of people never figures into the equation

Of course, self-righteousness is hardly restricted to Orthodox Jews. I was once at a meeting of rabbis and community leaders hosted by Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz, of blessed memory. During introductions one of the temple presidents discussed the amazing growth they had seen in the last several months. They had gone from barely a minyan (a quorum needed for public prayers) on Friday nights to almost one hundred and fifty attendees.

Rabbi Steinsaltz asked him, "To what do you attribute this massive turnaround?" He answered that the new rabbi had brought a band and instruments to provide musical accompaniment to the Friday night service. Rabbi Steinsaltz responded, "That's nice, but do you realize that all you really accomplished is that you brought many more people to far less of a synagogue

service?"

The classic book Animal Farm, written by George Orwell as a thinly veiled metaphor of the failed Russian Revolution of 1917, underscores what happens when good intentions go awry because of the "human" condition that, ultimately, personal interests will supersede values. Everyone is susceptible, which is why it is imperative to have a moral code that is immutable – hence the Almighty gave us just such a moral compass via the Torah.

Growing up and raising a family in South Florida it is almost obligatory to make a yearly (or in case of absolute child neglect, a biannual) pilgrimage to Orlando to visit the world's only people trap operated by a mouse. Many years ago, after a few trips experiencing the "magical fun" (of two hour waits for rides that are less than five minutes long, battling the Florida heat and humidity, and being subjected to hundreds of crying and complaining kids) I decided I needed to innovate a plan to conquer the challenges of Disney.

So innovate I did. I created a battle plan utilizing all of Disney's incentives (Fast Passes, early park entry and late park hours for guests staying at their hotels, etc.) and managed to map out every single ride in the four Disney parks that I felt my kids would like. More incredibly, I managed to squeeze them ALL into one day – albeit a very intense day.

Of course, neither my wife nor my teenage daughters were up for this kind of nonsense. So, I took my three boys, then ranging in ages from 8-13, and we ran through all the parks, following my precise "battle plan," which commenced at 7:30 am and finished at 2 am (at which point we were completely exhausted). By the end of that very hectic day we had hit all four parks and missed only two of the rides that I had targeted because my one hard and fast rule stipulated that I was unwilling to wait more than 10 minutes for a ride. For many years I looked back at this "achievement" with some pride; in my mind I had actually beaten Disney and avoided almost everything about it that I loathed.

But as I got older, I began to wonder if I had missed the point of Disney. Was a Disney experience really meant to be a challenge to be conquered instead of a family vacation? My wife, being a lot smarter than me, intuitively understood that what I was trying to do was going to be stressful and pressured, perhaps even stupidly so. She smartly steered clear of this endeavor and enjoyed her time with our daughters.

My annoyance and resentment led me to create a plan that actually may have defeated the point of going to Disney in the first place. In truth, much of what we do in life is filled with efforts that kind of miss the point of what you were trying to accomplish. It reminds me of the time I was in the hospital and had finally fallen into a restful sleep only to be awakened by a nurse who had been instructed to give me two pills to help me sleep.

People often seem to "miss the point" of religious observance as well. It is very easy to get so caught up in the minutiae of checking every box (like my Disney ride battle plan or following doctor's orders) that we miss out on the experience. I have noticed many devoutly religious men come to synagogue late and speed read through all the prayers to make sure they say everything, seemingly forgetting that the purpose of prayer isn't to say every word in the prayer book, it's about having a conversation with the Almighty. So too one could speed read at home, but one goes to synagogue for the community aspect, which is lost when arriving late and not participating in communal services.

In this week's Torah portion "Mishpatim – laws," we have a remarkable exchange between the Almighty and Moses that highlights this exact point. The Torah reading opens with:

"And these are the laws which you shall set before them" (21:1).

The great biblical commentator known as Rashi notes that the Almighty told Moses, "Do not think that it is enough to teach them (all the laws) chapter and verse, two or three times until it is organized in their (minds) and that you do not have to bother to explain them and make them understand what those laws mean. Rather, you must teach them the reasons for the laws as well. This is why the verse says, 'you shall set before them' – it must be placed before them like a set table from which one is ready to eat."

The Almighty seems to be concerned that Moses would feel that the most important thing to teach the Jewish people is what they have to do and how to do it. In other words, if Moses becomes concerned that he only has a limited amount of time to teach people, who also have a limited capacity to learn, he may decide not to spend the extra time explaining the reasons behind the mitzvot (commandments). Instead, he might focus on ensuring the people know every detail of how to fulfill the mitzvot and not on the underlying purpose of them.

Therefore, the Almighty informs him that it isn't enough just do the mitzvot, the people must understand the reasons as well. Why is this true and what does the analogy of "a set table from which one could readily eat" mean?

The Torah is presenting one of the most important underlying principles of Judaism. There are two purposes in eating: nutrition and pleasure. When God tells Moses to organize it for them as a set table, He is referring to the presentation of the mitzvot.

Food presentation speaks not to the nutritional aspect but rather to the pleasurable aspect of eating. People will pay substantially more at a high-end restaurant where the presentation and ambiance add to the pleasure of the experience. Though Moses is focused on the commandments as a way to fortify the people, God is telling him that it isn't enough to just fulfill them; the Jewish people are also meant to enjoy them.

Therefore, the Almighty informs Moses that the

laws are to be presented in such a way that the nation should find pleasure in them and have a desire to do them. The ultimate lesson is that the Torah must be transformative. It isn't enough to give charity; one must become a charitable person. A charitable person feels good and derives pleasure from helping others. It isn't enough to keep Shabbat; one must connect to the spirit of Shabbat and take pleasure in everything it has to offer.

One can only accomplish this by understanding the reasons behind the mitzvot. When one begins to understand that everything God asks of us is really for our own good, one comes to the realization that all these laws were given to us in order to provide us with the best possible life. In this way we begin to anticipate the experience of every one of God's commandments; only then can we begin to scratch the surface of all the good God has created for us in this world.

RABBI NAFTALI REICH

Legacy

Certain things in life are given, at least for people reared according to Judaic values and ideals. Compassion for the weak and downtrodden. Sympathy for those less fortunate than ourselves. Kindness to the disadvantaged. Hospitality to strangers. Why then does the Torah, in this week's portion, find it necessary to tell us to be kind to converts? Would it occur to anyone to act otherwise to a newcomer?

Furthermore, why does the Torah go on to tell us to be kind to converts because we too were "strangers in the land of Egypt"? Do we really need this rationalization in order to be sensitive to the feelings of a convert? And if we do a reason to be compassionate, will the experiences of our ancestors in Egypt many centuries ago really sensitize us to the feelings of newcomers whom we encounter today?

The commentators explain that the Torah certainly does not expect people to be so callous as to offend newcomers to Judaism deliberately. Clearly, these people are going through a very challenging experience, turning away from the old familiar pattern of their lives and setting out on uncharted waters. Many aspects of this experience are undoubtedly very traumatic and disorienting, and we all can be expected to be sympathetic and supportive. The problem lies elsewhere. Do we really know what the convert is feeling? Do we truly relate to the turmoil in his heart? Do we have any firsthand knowledge of the emotional strain, insecurity and loneliness that a newcomer experiences? Obviously not. How then can we be sensitive to them even if we want to?

Therefore, the Torah reminds us that we ourselves were once strangers in the land of Egypt, a persecuted minority struggling to survive in a hostile environment. Our very nationhood was forged in an alien setting, and the memory is deeply etched into our national consciousness. We need to connect to that experience in our minds, and in this way, we can revive within ourselves a hint of the experience of being a stranger in an alien land. Only in this way can we sensitize ourselves to the turmoil in the newcomer's heart. Only in this way can we treat him with true sympathy and friendship.

A wise old rabbi was trudging though the snow-clogged streets of a little village. Finally, he came to the house of one of the richest men in the village. He knocked on the door and waited patiently.

A servant opened the door and, seeing the old rabbi, immediately invited him in. But the rabbi just shook his head and asked to see the master of the house.

In no time, the rich man came hurrying to the door. "Rabbi, why are you standing outside?" he wanted to know. "It's so cold out there. Please come in where it is warmer."

"Thank you so much," said the rabbi, "but I prefer to stay out here. Can we talk for a moment?"

"Why, certainly, certainly," said the rich man. He shivered and pulled his jacket closer about him.

"Well, you see, it's like this," the rabbi began. "There are a number of poor families in this village who don't have any money -- "

"I'm sorry for interrupting, rabbi," the rich man said. His teeth were chattering. "You know I always contribute to the poor and hungry. Why can't we talk about this inside? Why do we have to stand out here?"

"Because these people need firewood," the rabbi explained. "I am collecting for firewood for poor families."

"So why can't we talk inside?" asked the rich man.

"Because I want you to feel what they are feeling," said the rabbi, "even if only for a few minutes. Imagine how they must be shivering in their drafty little houses with the ice-cold furnaces! The more you give me, the more families will be spared this dreadful cold."

In our own lives, we often relate to others -- children, family members, friends, associates -- by the standards of our own point of view. We see them through the prism of our own experience. But this does not lend itself to true sympathy and effective communication. Their attitudes and mindsets are colored by the nuances of their own characters and experiences and are therefore vastly different from ours. In order for us to be truly sensitive to them, we must try to put ourselves in their place. Only then will we be able to listen with open ears. Only then will we gain an inkling of what they are going through, of what they really feel inside. Only then can we even begin to provide the sympathy and support they deserve.