

### OVERVIEW

The beginning of our Sidrah contains a variety of laws under the general heading: "Holy shall you be, for Holy am I, G-d your G-d". Among the major laws are: duties towards the poor such as the "corner of the field" which must be set aside for them; honesty in social relationships: no oppression, no lies, no slander, no revenge; respect for the aged, protection for the stranger, scrupulous adherence to justice, exactitude in measures and weights. The Sidrah concludes with the listing of the various sanctions in cases of incest and prohibited marriages.

### COMMENTARY

#### The moral conduct of the Jew

At the very beginning our Sidrah discusses a problem that in our time is among the most difficult challenges to parents and educators alike: "Everyone must respect his father and mother and observe My Sabbaths, I am G-d your G-d". The grouping in this verse of two heterogeneous elements teaches us that respect for parents is intimately tied to the observance of the Sabbath for it is "I, G-d your G-d", the All-High Whose Law applies to parents and children alike. While absolute respect is due to those who educate us, parents and teachers, this obligation must stand aside when it would entail a conflict with the dictates of the divine law.

The duty of the educator is clear: Jewish education can never function at the expense of the respect for G-d and His law. In the not infrequent cases when parents attempt to curb the educator's efforts to guide his young charges on the path of Torah, he must try to convince them of the importance of instilling in their children the moral, spiritual and social values that they

may lack. Is it not natural for every father to wish for their son to be better and more successful than he? Why limit this hope to the areas of commerce and, social standing? Why not equip the child with the weapons of steadfastness and firmness to enable him to withstand the dangers inherent in a corrupt and degenerate age? Why not instill in him the determination never to compromise when it involves the unconditional observance of the Torah law?

It is the educator's task to be conscious at all times of his enormous responsibility in guiding a young soul on the path of Torah. Everything depends on the impact of his personality on his pupils, the example he sets for them in his own lifestyle. Every gesture is significant, every word meaningful. Total integrity in his relationship with, his fellowmen is as vital as his unquestioning commitment to the precepts of the Torah. That is the reason why, after dealing with the solution to the conflict between filial duty and religious commitment, the Sidrah turns to areas of social obligations.

A Jew loyal to Torah must never permit his conduct to arouse criticism of his fellow men. "You shall not curse a deaf person, do not place a stumbling block in the path of a blind man". With these words the Torah castigates any breach of confidence by which one profits from the weakness or ignorance of another. This raises the matter of business ethics, a problem that is all too often ignored by reason of business practice and economic pressure. Judaism does not disdain any human activity, be it manufacturer or broker, scientist or workman, as long as one earns a living without violating the rights of others.

The law is meticulous when it comes to drawing the boundaries of business ethics and general social relationships.

Withholding wages from an employee, even for a short time, is considered a severe transgression. Raising prices to take advantage of a person's acute financial stress is branded as an act of violence. No prayer or sacrifice can make amends for such crimes until the loss is compensated for and justice is done.

Jewish law prohibits theft in any form even if it is committed through a middleman or in such a way that the injured person is not aware of the fact. The Talmud cites the following example: in certain cases the law prescribes a four- or five-fold compensation for a living animal that was stolen and subsequently slaughtered or sold. There was a case of a poor man whose pride did not permit him to accept charity. A prospective donor had the idea of stealing the poor man's cow in order to be legally able to pay him the increased compensation and thus force him to accept the money from him. The sages opposed this plan on the grounds that every theft, however inspired by noble motives, is a punishable act.

The sages are especially critical of those who abuse the confidence of people who put their trust in their integrity and sincerity. "Man must be what he appears to be" says the Talmud. Hypocrisy, deceit, falseness, duplicity, put the perpetrator outside the framework of the law. Torah Judaism demonstrates its greatest moral power by its strict prohibition of hating one's fellow man. "You shall not hate your brother in your heart.... So that you will not sin because of it". We know only too well what havoc hatred can (\*\*\*) cause, whether or not it is perceivably justified. All too often have we been the target of attacks brought against us in a spirit of intolerance and fanaticism, we of all people should therefore be especially recognizant and respect this ever so important law. The Talmud cites a typical example of unjustified hatred and the harm that can result from it: Emperor Adrian was traveling to eastern provinces. A Jew was in the path

of the imperial carriage and saluted the Emperor. Immediately Adrian went into a frenzied rage: "How can you, a Jew, dare salute the Emperor? You shall pay with your life!". In the course of the same day, another Jew met the Emperor and, forewarned of the experience of his unfortunate brother, was very careful not to salute him. Adrian raged "How can you, Jew, dare pass in front of his Imperial Majesty without paying due respects? You have forfeited your life!". The Emperor's companions could not prevent but wonder about such this strange behavior on the part of their master, but Adrian explained: "I hate the Jews. I find all their deeds unbearable and every one of their acts, whether out of respect or of disrespect, are by me equal justification to annihilate them".

This episode underlines clearly the arbitrary of hatred that can take the most futile reasons as a pretext, and is not embarrassed by any contradictions to satisfy its thirst. But what is the behavior that our holy Torah recommends? "Thou shalt speak to thy brother and thou shalt warn him" – when for whatever reason you have cause to bear a grudge against your fellow Jew, you are obligated to discuss the issue openly with him, knowing that he is your very own brother and that your discussion should not serve to worsen your relationship, but rather quite to the contrary, to dissipate any eventual misunderstandings, or perhaps to amicably bring his attention to an error that he rendered himself guilty of. It is this behavioral pattern, taken from a profound love and from a spirit of sincere solidarity that, alone, is proper for the Jew. And the Talmud does not hesitate to tell us that neither erudition nor good deeds can erase the harm caused by a rude word or a hostile attitude.

This grandiose idea, from which all humane religions were inspired, is achieved by the prohibition of vengeance and rancor. Let us be precise: Vengeance – is to inflict upon the other person what one had to suffer

themselves. Rancor – is to answer with good or bad, but emphasizing in the process that one has not forgotten the ill of which one has be the victim, and indicating one's own generosity in one's own behavior as a result.

It is not only in the biblical text, but also in the post-biblical era of Jewish history that we find beautiful examples of this real Jewish behavior. Samuel Ibn Nagrela, a Jewish poet of the Spanish era (Eleventh Century C.E.), was the vizir of the King of Granada. One day, one his enemies disparaged him in front of the King. The King, being extremely attached to his Jewish friend the vizir, ordered him to sever the tongue of this enemy. However, the vizir did not fulfill the King's behest, rather by talking in a most friendly way to his enemy, turned him into his best friend. When the King subsequently questioned him about his reasons for disobeying the Royal decree, Samuel answered "I have accomplished your Royal wish since I removed his evil tongue and gave him a good one instead". Our Sages comment: "Who is really mighty? One who know to make a friend of his enemy". It is not for naught that our prayers, even on our national mourning day of Tisha B'Av, lack any words of vengeance. Certainly, we defend ourselves -- within our possibilities – against any attacks. But we know that our hearts should not preserve the mark of hatred. (Even when we pray in אֲבִינוּ מִלְכֵנוּ that G-d should "avenge the blood of his servants that has been spilled", we never suggest that we commit ourselves an act of revenge, rather we are specific that it is the spilled blood of his servants that we beg Hashem to avenge, since this is for the sake of כבוד שמי-ם). It is necessary here to underline the harm that was caused in the world's minds by the introduction of the personality of "Shylock", Venice merchant, that Shakespeare believed to have designated has the typical Jew of the middle-ages, without realizing that he thereby became the victim of the most infamous calumny. It is inappropriate to speak in our own defense, since one does

not speak well on one's own behalf. But it is incumbent upon us to pay justice to the countless victims of the fury of the world's nations; These victims that died with the words "Shma Yisroel" on their lips, and without the slightest word of revenge against those that, humanely speaking, may have arguably merited it.

#### The corner of the field

"When you shall harvest your land, thou shalt not complete thy field without leaving a corner and thou shalt not glean behind the harvesters". It is interesting to observe the change of person in the text: your land (plural), thy field (singular). However, it is precisely through this judicial nuance that brings about the great idea of this law: Only the collectivity, the nation as a whole, has a right to the land. The individual receives it as its manager, not its permanent and independent owner. The Jewish peasant needs to have in mind his absolute social obligations, while remaining the master of his fields. Therefore, "Thou shalt harvest thy field", but thou will perform this on a land that belongs equally to the poor, and on a land that must provide livelihood to the entire Jewish collectivity. It is extremely interesting to find that this fundamental law does not include any details regarding the size of this contribution relative to the existence and number of poor people. The reason being the confidence of the Legislator in everyone to exercise their own judgment and to determine the amount, bearing in mind – not what can he give – but what are the poors' needs.

#### "Thou shalt not mutilate thyself" (19.28)

In all appearances, this is a law referring to a pageant custom to mutilate themselves by cutting out parts of their bodies when they lost a close relative. However, in reality, it is only as an example that our holy Torah mentions the provenance of this barbaric custom. In a general manner,

any voluntary injury is strictly prohibited, whether it would result only in minimal consequences or whether it would cause death (i.e. suicide). Jewish thought does not conceive the possibility for the human being to dispose, by destroying it, of the body that the Creator has entrusted him with. Only the One that created it may dispose of it and nothing can authorize Man to cause an early termination to any function thereof nor to life in its entirety. It is this very life that is the object of our constant efforts. It is not to be vanquished, but rather ennobled. Our body is not the source of sins, rather very much the contrary, the body in all its perfection and beauty is entitled to our respect and its care.

Respect of the stranger.

Nothing is farther of our notion of justice than the abuse of power of which the stranger is so often the victim. And it is a magnificent document of humane solidarity and a real manifesto of "Human Rights" that is consisted in this injunction (19, 33-34): "Thou shalt love the stranger as thyself, because a stranger were thou in Egypt". The constitution of our land was based on absolute equality, on rights and duties, of every inhabitant of the land. It is precisely in commemoration of the ignominious inequality of the Egyptian constitution that recognized only landlords and slaves that has to convince our will to never again tolerate such injustice, and above all never to commit it ourselves. It is therefore not a wonder that since that era, the lot of this Right and the lot of Israel are intimately related. Pray examine any period in human history to examine how it handled this Right, and you shall know immediately how it handled Israel.

Just weights.

The tradition expresses itself in the most intransigent manner regarding any infraction of the most scrupulous honesty of the Jew. "One that does not respect the just weight (and this term does not only implicate the precise case of a commercial exchange, but rather includes all social relations of any nature whatsoever) render himself culpable of five severe faults: He soils his land, he profanes the name of G-d, he provokes a schism between G-d and mankind, he is the cause of the political ill-being of Israel and he contributes to inflict hardened exile upon our people". Our national well-being can be guaranteed only on the condition that our society relies upon the respect of the given word and the total rejection of commercial "facilities" (i.e. excuses). In no other place is there such a clear manifestation of the tendency of the Torah to entrench the Divine word – not only "in the Synagogue" – but equally "in the street". Our entire national existence depends on this sign, and the principle of honesty is without any doubt as fundamental as belief in G-d and the responsibility of Man.

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(\*\*\*) The remainder of the manuscript for this week's Parsha is missing. The following text was translated from the original French text by the publisher. In general, when comparing the original French text and the manuscript that formed the basis of this publication, there becomes apparent an obvious effort by the author and his illustrious brother and co-translator to contemporize the text. Since this publisher did not feel to own the right to such literary license, the text may be somewhat more complex and difficult to read. We trust that the reader will accept our sincere apologies for this unwitting result.

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