

In this Issue

- **Growth through Torah** by Sarah Maddali
- **Shraga's Weekly** by Rabbi Shraga Simmons
- **Torah for Your Table** by Rebbetzin Esther Jungreis
- **Rabbi Avraham Twerski's Insights on the Torah** by Rabbi Dr. Abraham Twerski



Is It Really Yours?

This week's Torah portion tells us we are obligated to lend money to a Jew in need. While the lender is allowed to collect collateral for his loan, if the borrower needs his object back for his livelihood, the lender is required to return the item, as the Torah states that should he cry out to God, God will listen as He is compassionate (22:25, 26).

Why would the lender be obliged to return the item? After all, isn't that the whole point of taking collateral?

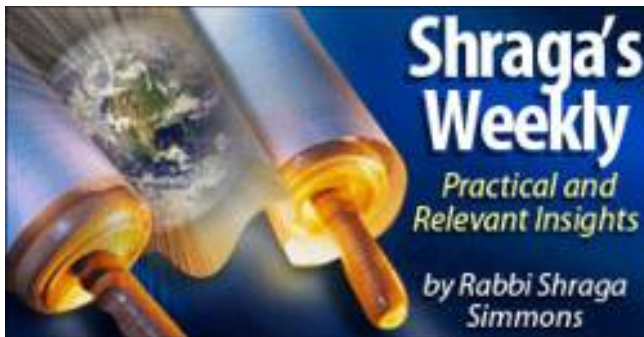
Lesson:

God is the creator of the world – from the heavens and seas down to a pencil on our desk. Everything exists solely because He wills it to exist. Saying a blessing helps illuminate this concept. Why say a blessing over a homemade piece of cake? After all, God didn't make it – you did! You went to the store, bought all the ingredients, paid for it with money that you worked hard to earn and then spent the time and effort making the cake. Where is God in this process?

However, when fully dissected, we see that God is in every step, just behind the scenes. The store got the flour from distributors and manufactures who bought wheat from farmers who planted and harvested the wheat. The wheat grows from a seed in the ground, both created solely from God. God also gave you all the capabilities needed to get the job and earn the money to buy the food from the store. God gave you the car to get to work and the store, the stove to cook the cake, and this list goes on.

When we have a mentality that we earned something, it is much harder to part with it. However, if we are aware that God is the source of everything and we only have what we have because God gave it to us to use it for the good, then we are much more willing to happily share. This is what the Torah is telling us: while it does allow for the lender to take collateral, that object is still not his and as such would have to be returned should the borrower need it. Everything is in our possession only because God wants us to have it.

Exercise: Give *tzedakah*, charity, this week with the intention that God only gave it to you for you to participate in the *mitzvah* of sharing with others. Have in mind that we are just the distributors!



Down-To-Earth Spirituality

Last week's Parsha told of the dramatic giving of the Torah to the Jewish people at Mount Sinai. It was a spiritual trip so powerful that every Jew literally had an out-of-body experience. The ultimate "wow!"

This week's follow-up, Mishpatim, is one of the longest Torah portions, containing an exhaustive list of over 50 separate mitzvot. Included are laws regarding kidnapping, personal injury and property damage, occult practices, helping the poor and vulnerable, returning lost objects, and alleviating the suffering of animals.

The juxtaposition between the two Parshas is striking: After the spiritual high of Mount Sinai, why would God "bring us down" (so to speak) with all these details of daily life? It's like being all heated up and then thrown into a cold shower. The two Parshas, it seems, are 180 degrees apart.

Actually, they're two sides of the same coin. The spiritual high of Sinai is gratifying, but it doesn't solve one problem of the world in which we live. Spirituality is not achieved by meditating alone on a mountaintop or by learning in an out-of-the-way monastery. Jewish spirituality comes through grappling with the mundane world in a way that uplifts and elevates.

Jews don't retreat from life, we elevate it. On Friday night, we raise the cup of wine – not to get drunk – but to make Kiddush and sanctify the Sabbath day. Spirituality, says Judaism, is to be found in the kitchen, the office, and yes, even the bedroom.

Flash of Inspiration

If that's true, why do we need Mount Sinai in the first place?

Because a powerful spiritual experience is what jump-starts our engines. We've all had such a moment of insight – whether at a Discovery Seminar, or standing atop Masada. But that feeling lasts only a short time.

Maimonides explains this metaphorically:

Imagine you're lost at night, trudging knee-deep in mud through a dark and vicious rainstorm. Suddenly a single flash of lightning appears, illuminating the road ahead. It is the only light you may see for miles. This single flash must guide you through the night.

So too, says Maimonides, one burst of inspiration may need to last for years.

The many practical, everyday scenarios described in this week's parsha send a very clear message:

To maximize a moment of insight, we must concretize it, allowing the spiritual insight to take root in the reality of our physical world.

Thus after being commanded in last week's parsha "Thou shall not steal," this week's parsha describes how to prosecute a thief. The lofty level of yesterday is no guarantee we'll retain that level tomorrow. Only through the laws of daily life can we hope to transform ourselves and our world.

Letter vs. Spirit

Modern society professes ideals of justice and compassion. Yet to what extent do these ideals find expression in everyday life? Do we always 'walk the walk'?

The key is legislation. By legislating Mitzvot like returning lost objects and caring for the widow and orphan, the Torah builds a framework for profound personal transformation.

This raises the whole issue of "letter of the law" versus "spirit of the law." "Letter of the law" is performing an act because it is prescribed by the Torah. "Spirit of the law" is performing an act because of an inner emotional sense.

Charity is one example. The Torah commands us to give 10% of our income to charity (the letter of the law), which is intended to develop within us feelings of compassion for others (the spirit of the law).

We should ideally have both. But given the choice of one or the other, which is more crucial?

Let's examine the following case from Dennis Prager:

Two Jews (of equal wealth) are each approached by a poor woman who needs money for her daughter's cancer surgery. One of these Jews, upon hearing the woman's plight, feels a deep sense of compassion, and amidst tears, gives the woman a dollar. The other Jew isn't nearly as moved, in fact he was in a hurry and couldn't talk to the woman. But because he observes the Jewish law requiring 10 percent of income go to charity, he gives the woman \$100.

Who is the "better Jew?"

Judaism would love you to give 10% of your income from the heart. It suspects, however, that in a large majority of cases, were we to wait for people's hearts to prompt them to give away thousands of dollars annually, we would be waiting a very long time. Judaism says: Give 10% – and if your heart catches up, terrific. In the meantime, a lot of good had been done.

The lesson of all this? "Doing" is more important than "feeling." This is one of the great lessons that Jews could teach in the post-'60s world which celebrates feelings. "How do you feel about it?" is not the Jewish question. "What do you do about it?" is the Jewish question.

Internalized Lessons

The Talmud says that God approached all the nations of the world and offered them the Torah. Only the Jewish people said "Na'aseh v'Nishma" – we are committed to fulfilling the mitzvot, and also strive to understand their deeper meaning.

Of course, we must strive to do mitzvot with emotional passion and practical, spiritual and intellectual understanding. But in terms of priority, a lack of understanding will not prevent our commitment to fulfilling them.

Another example is daily prayer. People say, "Why can't I just pray on those occasions when I'm inspired?" The answer is that, oftentimes, standing up to pray is exactly the catalyst needed to get inspired. It is a pro-active approach of putting oneself in a framework which nurtures and develops inspiration – rather than waiting for the inspiration to come to you.

The opening line of this week's Parsha is *Aileh hamishpatim asher tasim lefneyhem* – which can be translated as "these are the laws which you should place **inside** of them." The Zohar explains that the ideals of Sinai must be **internalized** and absorbed into our very bones. Whenever we have a moment of insight and clarity, we must channel that energy into a concrete act of renewal and repair.

That, the Torah tells us, is how we bring the heights of Sinai... down to earth.



Good Is Not Good Enough

"And these are the ordinances that you shall place before them" (Exodus 21:1).

This week's Torah portion opens with the words "*V'eileh hamishpatim* - And these are the ordinances" At first glance, it seems grammatically inappropriate to commence a chapter with the conjunction "and," but nothing in the Torah is to be taken for granted. Every letter, every syllable, every punctuation mark comes to teach us a lesson. The conjunction "and" reminds us that this *parashah* is connected to the preceding one, in which Revelation - the giving of the Torah - takes place, teaching us that even as the laws in the previous *parashah* were given at Sinai, the commandments pertaining to civil laws that are the focus of *Parashas Mishpatim* were also proclaimed at Sinai....But would we not understand this on our own? Do we really require the conjunction "and" to remind us that *all* of the Torah emanates from Sinai? Sadly enough, yes!

Most of us have a tendency to rationalize regulations that deal with our interpersonal relationships. It is "*our life*," we argue, and therefore we have the right to determine what is

appropriate or inappropriate. The Torah, however, reminds us that it is only the One Who created us Who can make such a determination. Only He can decide what is honest or dishonest, kind or cruel, moral or immoral, and precisely because of that, the Torah reminds us that those laws that legislate our personal relationships also emanate from Sinai, just as do the rituals and ceremonies enumerated in *Parashas Yisro*, which govern our relationship with God.

This message speaks to our generation, for we tend to interpret laws to accommodate our own needs and predilections. Morality, honoring parents, gossip, inflicting pain and injury, theft, can all be manipulated to justify our own desires. No matter how selfish our behavior may be, we can find a rationale for our actions or inactions. We pride ourselves on being *good people* who deal fairly, and forget that the Torah does not specifically command that we be "good." The word "good" is too ambiguous: every culture, every society, even the most base, has its own interpretation of goodness. Moreover, the definition of "good" is ever changing. That which yesterday was termed good may no longer be considered so today, and the converse is also true. That which in the past was regarded as evil and immoral can, regrettably, today be viewed as good and moral.

But the goodness by which we live, which was legislated at Sinai, is *rooted in eternity*. It comes from God Himself, Who created us. Thus, our Torah defines "good" and tells us how we must interact in our relationships on a personal, intimate level as well as in our general interaction. Nothing is left to chance. Life is too

precious; we can't afford to live it in error. Therefore, everything emanates from Sinai, showing us how to live a good life.

ETHICS AND TRUST IN GOD

There is yet another dimension to this connection between Sinai and our civil laws. As noted above, the Ten Commandments open with the words, "I am Hashem, Your God." By placing the laws of business ethics after the Ten Commandments, the Torah teaches us that he who is not ethical in business does not really trust God, for if he believed in Divine Providence, he would understand that, ultimately, it is God Who provides, it is He Who determines our income and therefore, it is futile to cheat, steal, or surrender to greed, for in the end, it will all catch up with us. We cannot outsmart God.

This connection once again reminds us that we must adhere to our moral and ethical laws, not necessarily because they appeal to our intellect, but because they were legislated by God and guide our behavior in the workplace as well as in the synagogue. This is a lesson that we dare not forget: "The beginning of wisdom is fear of Hashem." [1] If we lack that awe and awareness, all our wisdom, all of our morals and ethics can be twisted, corrupted, and rationalized to justify the most horrific evil. Just consider the evil that has and continues to plague us in our "civilized" and "enlightened" 20th and 21st centuries.

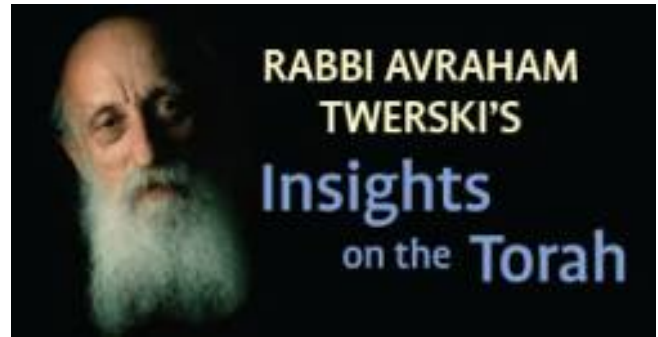
The Torah gives us a mandate to strive to emulate God and live by His commandments. Even as He is compassionate, we must strive to be compassionate. Even as He is forgiving, we must be forgiving. Our ethics and morals are all from

Hashem, and are therefore immutable and non-negotiable. How blessed are we to have laws that guarantee the integrity of our human interaction ... and what a pity it would be to be unaware of this gift.

This teaching is reinforced throughout the Torah. So it is that the Ten Commandments are engraved on two tablets: one for those establishing a relationship between man and God, and one for those establishing a relationship between man and his fellow man. The two tablets remind us that both relationships are equally holy. It was also for this reason that during Revelation, God pronounced all Ten Commandments simultaneously, so that it would be clear that no one commandment takes precedence over another. Moreover, a special section in the Mishnah is entitled *Ethics of Our Fathers*. It deals with human relations, but significantly, it commences with the monumental words, "Moses received the Torah from Sinai,"[2] once again impressing upon us that *all our ethical and moral commandments are of Divine origin*. In a world in which values, ethics, and morals seem to have lost their meaning, how powerful it is to know that our Torah has anchored us to timeless truths.

Even on a most elementary level, 21st-century man has yet to accept "You shall not kill." From Hitler to Arafat to Bin Laden to Ahmadinejad, it is obvious how desperately man needs God to regulate his behavior.

1. *Psalms 111:10; Proverbs 9:10.*
2. *Ethics of the Fathers 1:1.*



Redirect Your Aggression and Obstnacy

Six days shall you accomplish your activities, and on the seventh day you shall desist, in order that your ox and donkey may rest (23:12)

There are some verses on which Rashi comments, "this verse demands an interpretation"; i.e., it cannot be taken literally. The above verse is one that demands an interpretation.

The Talmud says that if a person observes Shabbos properly, it is as if he observed the entire Torah, whereas if one violates Shabbos, it is as if he violated the entire Torah (Jerusalem Talmud, Nedarim 3). The Torah repeats the commandment of observing Shabbos several times, and it is one of the Ten Commandments. Yet, if we take the above verse literally, "in order that your ox and donkey may rest," it would seem that the sole purpose of Shabbos is to provide respite for work animals. That can hardly be true. We must, therefore, look for another meaning in this verse, and the Torah commentaries provide it for us.

The mussar authorities say that the ox is the symbol of strength and energy, while the mule is a symbol of indolence and obstnacy. This is why,

when the Torah wishes to tell us that a combined effort by two people or animals of opposite nature is prohibited, it states, “You shall not plow with an ox and a mule together” (Deuteronomy 22:10; Chinuch, Mitzvah 550).

We have a variety of character traits, in some of which we take pride, others we may wish to disown. The chassidic and mussar writings say that all human traits can be channeled into constructive channels. A person may wish to deny his feelings of aggression or obstinacy. There is no need to deny these. Rather, they should be directed toward constructive goals.

In psychology, there is the concept of sublimation. It is theorized that the subconscious mind can redirect an unacceptable drive toward proper goals. Thus, psychologists say, an astronomer who peers through a telescope or a scientist who looks through a microscope has converted a voyeuristic drive into a constructive curiosity. Although sublimation is certainly a beneficial mechanism, it is not accomplished consciously. The person has no awareness of the origin of his scientific curiosity.

Our ethicists say that there is no need to deny or repress any urge or drive. These are part of our physiological makeup. Rather, we should allow ourselves to be aware of them and consciously redirect them. But this requires introspection and self-examination, something which most people have little time to do. We are too occupied with our daily activities to take time out for meditation, contemplation and soul-searching.

Shabbos provides the opportunity for introspection. “Six days shall you accomplish

your activities, and on the seventh day you shall desist.” Desist and refrain from all your usual activities. Freeze your aggressive, assertive, indolent and obstinate traits. Let them not be manipulated by subconscious mechanisms. Allow them to be at rest, where you can examine them and see what you can do with them.

This is indeed a worthy function of Shabbos. It gives a person the opportunity to enhance one’s spirituality by becoming the finest human being one can be.

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