

CHAPTER 1, MISHNA 18(B): JEW VS. GENTILE IN THE EYES OF THE TORAH - PART II

by Rabbi Dovid Rosenfeld

Rabbi Shimon ben (son of) Gamliel said: On three things does the world endure: justice, truth and peace, as the verse states, 'Truth and judgments of peace judge in your gates' (Zechariah 8:16).

Last week we discussed the difference between this mishna and Chapter 1 Mishna 2. As we saw, this mishna is not discussing the purpose and ultimate goals G-d had in mind in creating the world. Rather, it discusses the prerequisites necessary to allow the world to "endure" -- to function smoothly without disintegrating into anarchy. Individuals as well as nations must abide by the dictates of truth, peace and justice in order that societies function and civilizations flourish. With this prerequisite in place, when a spirit of peace and tolerance reigns among men, man will be able to devote himself to more profound religious devotion and spiritual growth. If, however, the world deteriorates into chaos and lawlessness, man will be forced to expend all his energies on his basic survival and making ends meet, and he will have neither time nor composure to focus on matters more lofty.

We then noted that the obligation to create functional societies was not placed on Israel alone but on all mankind. G-d did not entrust the world to Israel alone; He gave it to all of man. And He asked us all to take care of it -- environmentally for starters, as Adam was commanded to both "work" and "protect" the Garden of Eden (Genesis 2:15) (neither of which we're doing very well today). But even more significantly, G-d instructed man in the Seven Noahide Laws in order that man create just societies -- receptive to the concepts of morality, fair play, and religious commitment. Man was instructed not to become religious ascetics -- the Seven Laws include only the real basics (murder, adultery, theft, etc.) -- but to cultivate within himself and within society a basic appreciation for godly values. And by so doing, not only would the societies of man become reflections of the truth of G-d, but they would become places conducive to more serious spiritual and character development -- the type Israel would then introduce to the world.

The above was a brief synopsis of our discussion last week. We thus observed that G-d both entrusted the nations of the world with stewardship of the planet and gave them their own set of mitzvos (commandments) towards that end. (And as we also pointed out, not only were certain mitzvos made binding upon them, but they were promised a share in the World to Come for their proper observance.) That being said, I'd like to point out a significant difference -- perhaps the key difference -- between the Noahide Laws and the mitzvos placed upon Israel. It is based on a lecture

heard from my teacher, R. Yochanan Zweig.

The Midrash (Sifri, Deut. 343:2) states as follows: G-d, before offering the Torah to Israel, offered it first to all the nations of the world. The encounter with each nation went roughly as follows: Nation: "What does it say?" G-d: "Thou shalt not kill." Nation: "What?! No wars?! No duels?! No 'honor' killings?! No Monday night football?! Nothing doing!" G-d approached the next nation. Nation: "What does it say?" G-d: "Thou shalt not steal." Nation: "What?! Full disclosure to the IRS?! Accurate insurance claims?! No music 'sharing'?! Forget it!" -- and too responded in the negative. Finally, G-d offered the Torah to Israel. We asked no questions, responded "We will do and we will hear" (Exodus 24:7), and became G-d's chosen nation.

The message, evidently, is that the other nations of the world had allowed certain negative tendencies and practices to become too ingrained in their natures. They could no longer aspire to the true ideals of the Torah and instead were left to wallow in their immorality. Israel, however, was ready and willing to rise to the challenge.

There is, however, a glaring difficulty with this passage. Murder and robbery are two of the Seven Noahide Laws! These nations were **already** commanded not to kill and steal! If so, why did these laws scare them off from Torah acceptance? Perhaps they didn't like them to begin with, but accepting or rejecting the Torah would in no way alter the fact. If so, how could these laws have been their reason for refusing the Torah?

Even beyond this, there is no such thing as a civilized society which openly condones murder and robbery -- except ones literally in the process of self-destruction? Could these nations really have intended to reject such basic and rational laws -- clearly necessary for the function of any society?

R. Zweig explained that there is a fundamental difference between the Noahide injunctions not to kill and steal and the Jewish ones. When G-d told the nations of the world not to kill, it meant to refrain from the **act** of killing. As we have seen, the purpose of the Seven Laws is primarily in order that society not self-destruct. No society can exist in a state of lawlessness. We will learn later, "Pray for the welfare of the government for if not for its fear, a man would swallow his fellow live" (3:2) -- a fairly accurate description of what occurs during a blackout. For even the most violent-prone among us appreciate that man must refrain from overt acts of violence in order to maintain any semblance of law and order.

Israel, however, was not merely commanded to refrain from the acts of killing and stealing. The Torah asks of us infinitely more -- that we grow into people who appreciate that such acts are inherently evil. The purpose of the mitzvos is not only to control our behavior. It is to enlighten us, to instruct us in G-d's value system. We are to become people who relate to G-d's values -- and who thereby relate to G-d Himself. We must grow to appreciate the beauty of the mitzvos to the extent that we do not **want** to behave otherwise. And when we reach this level -- of not wanting to sin -- our souls and bodies unite in wholehearted service of G-d.

This might be considered the single defining principle of Jewish law. And its application is found practically everywhere. On its crudest level, "thou shalt not kill" refers to physically taking another life. But G-d in truth had far more in mind. "Thou shalt not kill" is a value statement: human life is important. Man is sacred and fashioned in the image of G-d. And if a human being is valuable, his feelings, his well-being, and his quality of life are important as well. The Talmud tells us that one should sacrifice his own life rather than publicly embarrass his fellow (Sotah 10b) -- just as one must sacrifice his own life rather than kill another.

Likewise, not only are we forbidden to steal, but we may not disturb our fellow's sleep -- "stealing" his relaxation time, nor invade and "steal" his privacy. (The Talmud forbids such acts as adding a window to your house which offers you a view of your neighbor's backyard (without explicit permission) -- even to open a second window when a first already exists.)

And this is the story behind virtually every mitzvah in the Torah. The Vilna Gaon (18th Century leader of Lithuanian Jewry) wrote that the entire purpose of the commandments is so that we improve our characters. The Talmud expresses it likewise: "G-d wants our hearts" (Sanhedrin 106b). The deeds themselves the Torah instructs us in are finite, but the levels of growth and appreciation we must strive towards are unbounded.

And this, according to the Talmud, was what the nations of the world were not ready to accept. To be sure, such a relationship with G-d had hardly been denied them. They too can and should aspire to grow to appreciate G-d's laws and build a relationship with Him. Let me in fact reiterate this so I'm not misunderstood. Isaiah (42:6) writes that Israel is to be a light and example to the nations. We live the relationship with G-d that He truly wants with all His children. As I often write, what Israel has been **commanded** in, the nations are told to **aspire** to. Our relationship is special, but it is not exclusive. It is an opening and an invitation to all mankind.

Even so, it is important to appreciate the crucial difference between 7 laws and 613. It is hardly a matter of more of the same. The 613 Commandments introduce an entirely new level of closeness to G-d. We are not only to restrain our actions, as all men must. We must grow to appreciate that sinful behavior is inherently wrong. We must not want to kill, steal or commit adultery. And this was not commanded on the nations of the world. Yet it is the special challenge which G-d has challenged -- and favored -- the Children of Israel.

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