

# THE TRUE VALUE OF FIVE TIMES

*by Rabbi Yisroel Ciner*

This week's parsha, Mishpatim, begins "V'aileh hamishpatim--And these are the commandments." Rashi explains that our parsha begins with the word 'and' in order to connect these laws to the aforementioned Aseres Hadibros [Ten Commandments]. This teaches that all of the commandments were from Sinai. Even the seemingly mundane laws have the raw power and energy to transform and elevate the person and bring him close to Hashem.

When discussing the laws of a thief's compensatory payment the Torah teaches: "If a man steals an ox or a sheep and slaughters or sells it, five oxen he will pay for the ox and four sheep for the sheep. [21:37]"

At first glance, it would seem a bit difficult to see, within this commandment, the intense spiritual potential to draw close to the Creator, but let's look a little further.

Rashi brings two opinions as to why the payment is five times the ox but only four times the sheep.

Rabi Yochanan ben Zakai explained that by the ox, the thief was able to lead his booty away in a relatively dignified manner. By the sheep, however, he had to somewhat humiliate himself by making his getaway carrying it on his shoulders. That embarrassment is a part of his 'payment' and he therefore only pays four and not five times the amount that he stole.

Rabi Meir looked at this passuk [verse] and saw the great importance that the Torah attaches to honest work. By stealing an ox, the thief caused the owner to be unable to plow his field and earn his livelihood--for that he must pay five times the amount stolen. By stealing a sheep, on the other hand, he wasn't impeding the owner's ability to work. He therefore only pays four times the amount stolen.

The value of an honest living...

I recall how as a young boy, my father, hk"m, would take me along when he would visit patients in their homes, often in extremely poor neighborhoods. Before we would go into the home he would stress to me that they are very poor but work hard and honestly to earn their money. "Always respect someone who works hard and earns an honest living," he would tell me over and over.

It didn't matter what a person's job was. When I would accompany him to Long Island University where he was a professor for close to thirty years, he would introduce me to the custodians the same way that he introduced me to the deans and department heads. "Always respect someone who works hard and earns an honest living..."

My sister told me a story that was very revealing. There is a teenage girl who would clean off the tables at a pizza place near where my father z"l lived in Florida. He would love to take the grandchildren there to eat. When this young lady heard of my father's passing, she began to cry. "Whenever he would come here, he would ask how I was, ask about my family and thank me for cleaning off the tables."

The Mishna [Avos 4:1] teaches: Who is honored? He who honors others.

For many people this becomes an arduous task. We don't necessarily see the great value in others but we nevertheless try to fulfill the words of the Sages and honor all people.

Others of a greater stature, however, can look at a teenager working in a pizza place, understand that she probably has many friends who are on the streets and genuinely respect her for working hard and earning an honest living. I'd imagine that that is the true intent of the Mishna--to recognize the value that can be found in individuals and as a result, sincerely honor them. People are sensitive and know if they are being genuinely honored--anything short of that would fall short of what the Sages called "He who honors others."

Once one has taught oneself to focus on the value in others, even when there seems to be other aspects in those individuals that might not be so commendable, one can then move on to the next step. To weather the difficulties and challenges that arise through life, at first seeing the good in what Hashem has granted and then accepting that ultimately we will understand how even the painful tragedies were actually a blessing.

But only by internalizing the 'mundane' law of paying five times for an ox...

Good Shabbos,  
Yisroel Ciner

*L'iluy nishmas Avi Mori Asher Chaim ben Tzvi, hk"m. TNZB"H*

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