

SETTING NORMS

by Rabbi Aron Tendler

The final verses in last week's Parsha, in the aftermath of the giving of the Torah, listed four commandments. 1. (20:20) Do not make gods of gold and silver. 2. (20:21) The Mizbeach - altar must sit directly on the ground. It cannot be a platform situated on pylons or legs. (That is why the hollowed structure of the Mizbeach had to be filled with dirt or sand - See Rashi) 3. When using stones to construct the Mizbeach they must not be cut or shaped by metal tools. 4. To avoid exposing the Kohain's ankles when ascending the Mizbeach, a ramp, not steps, must be used to get to the top.

Why were these four laws stated right after Mattan Torah - the Giving of the Torah?

The placement of these four Mitzvos after the Giving of the Torah and preceding this week's Parsha of social laws suggests that in some way they serve as a summation of Revelation and an introduction to this week's compendium of social laws.

The Aseres Hadibros - Ten Commandments have captured the attention of the world. Most religions and cultures view them as the fundamental formulation of personal and societal ethical behaviors. They are more often quoted in relation to social and individual behavioral expectations than any other set of rules.

As students of the Torah we understand the importance of these Ten Statements.

First they declare the primacy of G-d as Creator of the universe. Secondly, they declare the primacy of G-d the Law Giver and the value of human life as the basis for all social and familial relationships.

The proof of this thesis is the final commandment, "Do not covet your neighbor's wife or property." (20:15) Coveting refers to desire and jealousy, not necessarily action. As Rav Hirsch explains,

"A mortal ruler can legislate against such acts as murder and theft, but only G-d can demand that the people sanctify their thoughts and attitudes to the point where they purge themselves of such natural tendencies as jealousy and covetousness."

The basis for all social justice is the acceptance that a person and his property are divinely conferred. Therefore, a true believer should respect the person and property of another with the same determination that he would not deny G-d's primacy. Murder and thievery in any form is tantamount to idol worship. The Tenth Commandment instructs that the true believer purges his

mind and heart of all desire for that which is not his and that which he cannot legally attain.

The Tenth Commandment focuses us on the importance of personal development. It is not sufficient to live in a society where people control their emotions and behaviors. As my Father Shlita often asks, "Would you want to be with a person who continuously struggle ask himself, "Should I kill today or shouldn't I kill today? You see that person? I could kill him, but I won't. It is not nice. It is not moral. It is not ethical. I will control myself." As the Rambam writes, "If you live in a evil society, run for the hills, hide out in caves, escape from society!"

G-d intended humanity to have a base line of behavior that is standard for all families and societies. G-d did not intend His gift of freewill to be a continuous burden. Certain fundamental beliefs and values, such as the primacy of G-d and the value of a person and his property, must become the norms of personal and social interaction. They must become the reactive response rather than the deliberate response. They must be the expected rather than the hoped for. A society can succeed when the primacy of G-d and the value of a person and his property have been removed from the dynamics of freewill and decision-making.

The four Mitzvos at the end of last week's Parsha underscore the primacy of G-d the Creator and the value of a person and his property.

The first Mitzvah, "Do not make gods of gold and silver," establishes G-d's primacy. It doesn't get much simpler than that.

With the second Mitzvah, the Torah focused on the Mizbeach. The Alter represents offerings, and Tefilah - prayer. Offerings and prayers are intended to be the daily expression of our absolute subjugation to G-d's primacy. To subjugate our will in the service of G-d is to embrace the primacy of G-d. To embrace the primacy of G-d is to integrate the value of a person and his property into the norms of personal and social interaction. Therefore, the Mizbeach and its laws emphasize this fundamental understanding of who we are and why G-d created us.

The second Mitzvah, "The Mizbeach must sit directly on the ground," establishes our responsibility as G-d's subjects to elevate the material world in service to G-d. The degree to which we use the physical world in a manner that reveals the primacy of G-d and the value of every person and his property is the degree to which we elevate the world into the realm of purpose and meaning. Therefore, "the Mizbeach can not be a platform situated on pylons or legs. Rather it must be a pile of dirt or stones rising from the earth and symbolically reaching upward toward the heavens.

The third Mitzvah, "When stones will be used to construct the Mizbeach they must not be cut or shaped by metal tools," establishes our responsibility as G-d's subjects to elevate the social world in service to G-d. Metal tools symbolize weaponry and strife. In their most extreme form, social and familial differences result in social breakdown, revolution, and armed conflict.

History is a long and ignoble record of religious intolerance and violence. Crusades, inquisitions,

jihads, pogroms, genocides, ethnic cleansings, and tribal massacres have left in their wake a legacy of death and destruction. Without doubt, every instance of wanton murder and annihilation used religion to justify their hatred, bias, and intolerance. Therefore, humanism and its myriad of religious manifestations (justifications) subjugated G-d to its own vile purposes rather than being an expression of society's subjugation to G-d. It was G-d in the service of society, not society in the service of G-d.

The Jewish mission as stated before Mattan Torah was to be a "kingdom of priests and a holy nation." The symbolic expression of our priestly holiness was the daily service in the Temple and our prayers. They are our expression of devotion and subjugation. They obligate us to serve G-d through serving humanity. The most effective way of serving humanity is to manifest our devotion to G-d and His laws in the daily workings of our families and society. Therefore, the Mizbeach must remain apart from all human strife and conflict. Individual wants, needs, and differences are not significant in relation to G-d and His intentions. Our needs and wants should be defined by G-d's wishes, not the opposite. Therefore, metal tools symbolizing weaponry and strife cannot be used in the construction of the Mizbeach.

The final Mitzvah, "Avoid exposing the Kohain's ankles by using a ramp to ascend the Mizbeach," complements the Tenth Commandment, "Do not covet your neighbor's wife or property."

Tzniut - modesty is a situational and circumstantial value. There are some givens that are not negotiable; however, it is understood that some degrees of undress and styles of dress can be determined by setting and purpose. The heightened sensitivity demanded by G-d in relation to the Mizbeach must therefore be understood.

Mattan Torah set the Jews apart from all other nations. As the evil Billam declared, "They are a nation that dwells alone and does not judge itself by the scales of other nations." (Bamid.23:9) Just as the Torah sets us apart from all other people so too clothing sets the human apart from all other animals.

As the Kohain ascended the Mizbeach he represented his nation and world in service to the Creator. His unique divinity in being created in G-d's image demanded the most extreme modesty so that he would be as symbolically different from the other animals inhabiting the world as possible. The other animals are part of the physical world and only the physical world. They cannot elevate the physical universe through the subjugation of their free wills to G-d's laws. Only the human, and in this instance, the representative of humanity - the Kohain - can elevate the physical world in service to G-d. Therefore, he must willfully cover himself from head to toe to proclaim his distinctiveness. As such, the Kohain proclaimed the uniqueness of being human and the chosenness of his nation. As such, the Kohain manifested the Jews purpose and humanity's purpose in being created. He was created to receive G-d's Torah and thereby serve both nation and humanity. G-d and humanity do not serve the Jew. The Jew serves G-d and humanity.

The first word in Mishpatim continues with the same theme of the primacy of G-d the Law Giver and the value of human life as the basis for all social and familial relationships. Rashi quotes the Mechilta that explains why the Parsha begins with the letter "Vuv." "Vuv - and" at the beginning of a word functions as a bridge between the present topic and the topic that preceded it. The letter "Vuv" connects the lesson of Mattan Torah and the 4 concluding Mitzvos to Parsha Mishpatim.

The laws detailed in this week's Parsha are primarily social. Most societies conveniently divorce G-d from society; the often-toted "separation of church and state." The legal codes governing various societies reflect, at best, human hope, intelligence, courage, and limitations. At worse, they perpetrate evil and disaster upon humanity. The only way to maximize success and minimize failure is to impose G-d and His law. G-d is not subject to time and His law is not subject to change. Whether the laws of Shabbos and Kashrus or the laws of justice and personal responsibility, all of them were divinely given at Mt. Sinai.

The key to understanding the social laws of Mishpatim is to reflect on the fundamental reason for doing them. Most, if not all of the 54 Mitzvos in Mishpatim, are rational and humanistic. They are emotionally agreeable and intelligent. However, as recorded at the end of the Parsha (24:7) the Jews proclaimed, "We will do as You command and then we will attempt to understand why." First and foremost, we will do as G-d commands, regardless of what we think or feel. However, we will attempt through the study of Torah to understand G-d's reasons. However, if we should fail to unlock the rational of the Divine, we will not falter in our obligation to fulfill His laws. The challenge of Mishpatim is to go beyond the levels of our comprehension and make the primacy of G-d and the value of a person and his property the norms of our personal and social interaction.

The Four Parshios

Practically speaking, Shabbos was the one-day during the week when the community gathered. Therefore, the Rabbis chose Shabbos as the most opportune time to make timely Halachic and communal announcements. Associating these announcements with a Torah portion is indicative of the focus that each of us is supposed to have in regards to integrating Hashem (G-d) into our lives. These announcements were not simply relegated to a public pronouncement or a few lines on a sheet, but were associated with the reading and the study of Torah.

There are four special Shabbosim preceding Pesach when additional portions from the Torah are read. Set rules determine when each of these additional Parshios is to be read.

Parshas Shekalim, the first of the special Shabbosim preceding Pesach, is read on the Shabbos that precedes the month of Adar, or the Shabbos of Rosh Chodesh Adar (when Rosh Chodesh and Shabbos coincide-as they do this year). Parshas Zachor is read on the Shabbos before Purim. Parshas Parah is read on the Shabbos before the Shabbos of Parshas Hachodesh. Parshas Hachodesh is read on the Shabbos before the month of Nissan or the Shabbos of Rosh Chodesh Nissan (when Rosh Chodesh and Shabbos coincide).

Shekalim

A key function of the Bais Hamikdash was the offerings of the daily, Korban Tzibur - communal offerings. The designation of "communal" was because every male adult, 20 years and older, donated a $\frac{1}{2}$ shekel toward the purchase of the daily communal offerings. (Inherent in the concept of the $\frac{1}{2}$ shekel and the communal offerings was the importance of family units, not individuals.) These monies were gathered and used to purchase the daily sacrifices. The law requires that all offerings must be purchased from monies collected for that year. The fiscal year for public offerings was from Nissan to Nissan. Therefore, the Rabbi's ordained that the portion of the Torah (KiTisa) describing the first collection of the $\frac{1}{2}$ shekel be read on the Shabbos of or before Rosh Chodesh Adar, one month before the $\frac{1}{2}$ shekel was due, as a reminder that everyone should send in their money.

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