

REALIZING IDEALISM

by Rabbi Berel Wein

Having just heard the exalted message of the Ten Commandments, the Jewish people were undoubtedly inspired and committed to do great things in their lives. Yet, the Ten Commandments, upon close inspection and analysis, are pretty much generalities. What is the definition of murder, of stealing, of coveting? How is one to remember the Sabbath day and to keep it holy? How is one to honor one's father and mother? What does it mean to take God's name in vain? None of this is spelled out for us in the Ten Commandments, as inspiring and demanding as these words are. The words of the Ten Commandments are too vague to implement, too lofty to translate into practical everyday human life. That is why the Torah immediately follows the section detailing the Ten Commandments with this week's parsha section of Mishpatim with its laws and details - the nitty-gritty of Jewish observance and tradition. And, since the written Torah itself does not communicate to us all of the necessary details and instructions, it is the Oral Law that provides the final interpretation and explanation that transforms the lofty ideals of the Ten Commandments into concrete actions and established behavior patterns of everyday human life. People tend to pay lip service to lofty goals and great ideals, but rarely are able to translate these goals and ideals into their own behavior without specific instructions and detailed guidelines.

We have seen in the world how great ideals like love, peace, tolerance, etc. fall by the wayside unless laws and judicial systems are put into place to define and safeguard them. The Torah does not leave these matters to chance or human vagaries. Judaism is a faith of details. I learned long ago in law school and later in actual legal practice that the devil is truly in the details. This week's parsha is the springboard for five or six major tractates of the Talmud, for many hundreds of pages of discussions and for the opinions of countless scholars over the ages - all to establish the details of Sinai and translate them into everyday life. Jewish life as we know it is an outgrowth of these discussions, opinions, explanations and minute details. Those who relegate details to unimportance are doomed to lose the ideals as well over time.

There is a story that ruefully illustrates this point. A rabbi is sitting next to a Jewish astrophysicist on a plane. The professor leans over and sees the rabbi studying Talmud and upon being told what Talmud is - the details of Jewish life - the professor loftily remarks: "I don't need any of that. All religion can be summed up in one sentence - love your fellow man. That is all there is to it." The rabbi upon learning that his traveling companion is a professor of astrophysics, sweetly retorts: "Well, I can sum up all of astrophysics in one sentence - twinkle, twinkle little star!" Life, Judaism, and astrophysics are all too complex to be summed up in one sentence, no matter how lofty the

ideals expressed. That is why Mishpatim is such an important part of Torah learning.

Shabat Shalom.
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