

THE EXTENDED FAMILY CALLED SOCIETY

by Rabbi Berel Wein

Among the many topics of importance discussed in this week's parsha is that of the relationship between employer and employees. The Torah also discusses the relationship between debtor and creditor and between the grantor of collateral and the holder of such collateral. A creditor and/or lender are not allowed to oppress the borrower and/or debtor. The creditor/lender is certainly entitled legally to have his obligation redeemed by the debtor/borrower. But he is not allowed to abuse the debtor/borrower, to threaten him or her or to abuse that person's right of privacy in his or her home.

The Torah always attempts to protect the rights of the lender, for only in such a fashion can there be assurance that there will be people willing to lend money to the needy. But the Torah, ever mindful of the fact that "a borrower is always a slave unto the lender," protects that borrower from the abuses, physical and social, that such a relationship may entail. The Torah, which always balances and reconciles conflicting legal and moral values, does so here regarding the creditor-debtor relationship.

The same sense of balance is striven for in the Torah regarding the employer-employee relationship as well. The employer is not to exploit the worker that labors on his behalf. He is to pay the employee a fair wage and must pay it to him in a timely fashion. But the employee in turn is duty bound to work in an honest and diligent manner for the employer. As can readily be understood, the employee is not allowed to steal from the employer - not time, money or property. These two contrasting values of the relationship between employers and employees form the basis for all discussions of Jewish labor law in the Talmud and the codes of Jewish law. The Torah is not on the side of either the employer or the worker. It is on the side of fairness and rectitude in societal matters.

Ramban, in looking at Jewish social law as a whole, asserts that the underlying principle in all of these matters is that of family. Jews are a family one to another and therefore the accepted norms of family behavior are to be enforced even if the Jews involved feel less than familiar - to the employer, the creditor, and the lender. In a family one does not take interest for a loan to another family member. One does not tend to exploit the labor of a family member, just as one is willing to work for the general good of society over and above narrow, selfish considerations.

The ideal Jewish family is free of abuse and exploitation. It jealously protects the individual's right to privacy and strengthens the ability of a debtor to protect his home and belongings from prying eyes

and grasping hands. Therefore, all of the societal laws of the Torah, when viewed from the perspective of family love and cooperation, are in harmony with all societal values.

For in a functioning and loving family there are no victims and no bullies. There are only next of kin that are 'flesh of our flesh and bone of our bone.' And this is the goal of family that the Torah wishes us to achieve through its instructions and commandments regarding all societal issues.

Shabat shalom.

Rabbi Berel Wein Rabbi Berel Wein - Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at www.rabbiwein.com

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