

INTRODUCTION TO JEWISH LAW

by Rabbi Berel Wein

The Torah follows its exhilarating and inspirational description of the revelation at Mount Sinai with a rather dry and detailed set of various laws that are to be followed by the people of Israel. It is one thing to be inspired and thus acquire great ideals. It is another thing completely to be able to transfer those ideals and inspiration into everyday life on a regular basis.

We are all aware that the devil is always in the details. It is natural to agree that one should not steal or murder. But what is really the definition of stealing? Is taking something that originally did not belong to you always considered stealing? How about grabbing my neighbor's rope and using it to save a drowning person? Is that also stealing? Is self-defense murder? Are court imposed death penalties murder?

How are we to deal with such complex moral issues? This is really the crux of all halacha and this week's parsha serves as our introduction to the concepts of Jewish law. Without an understanding of the practice of halacha, the great ideals and inspiration of the Torah are almost rendered meaningless and unachievable.

The Torah concentrates not only on great ideas but on small details as well. From these small details spring forth the realization of the great ideals and the ability to make them of practical value and use in everyday life. Hence the intimate connection between this week's parsha and the revelation at Mount Sinai discussed in last week's parsha. There is a natural and necessary continuity in the narrative flow of these two parshiyot of the Torah.

I think that this idea is borne out by the famous statement of the Jewish people when asked if they wished to accept the Torah. In this week's parsha their answer is recorded as: "We will do and we will listen." All commentators and the Talmud comment upon the apparently reverse order of this statement. People usually listen for instructions before they "do." But the simple answer is that the people of Israel realized that listening alone will be insufficient.

The great and holy generalities of the Torah are valid only if they are clearly defined, detailed and placed into everyday life activities. We have to "do" in order to be able to "listen" and understand the Torah's guidance and wishes fully. The Talmud records that a non-Jew once told a rabbi that the Jews were a "hasty and impulsive people" in accepting the Torah without first checking out its contents. But in reality, that holy hastiness of Israel was a considered and mature understanding that a Torah of ideas and inspiration alone without a practical guide to life would not last over the

centuries of Jewish history.

Only those who are willing to "do" and who know what to "do" will eventually appreciate intellectually and emotionally the greatness of Torah. Only then will they be able to truly "listen" and appreciate the great gift that the Lord has bestowed upon Israel - the eternal and holy Torah.

Shabat shalom.

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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