

THE TORAH IS A BOOK OF REALITY

by Rabbi Berel Wein

The Torah reading of this week deals with the difficulties and pettiness of human life. I find this to be extraordinary since only last week the Torah dealt with the exalted principles and values system of holiness as represented by the Ten Commandments.

It seems to be a letdown to have to speak about oxen goring and people fighting, enslaving and damaging one another when we were apparently just elevated to the status of being a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.

The beginning point of the education of many a Jewish child in Mishna and in Talmud is located in the very prosaic laws of torts and damages discussed in this week's Torah reading. In effect the law book part of the Torah begins by showing us people at their worst behavior and weakest moments. Would it not be more inspiring if the Torah somehow began this detailed part of Jewish law with more inspiration and spirituality?

Yet we are all aware that the most studied volumes of the Talmud - the real meat and potatoes - are those tractates that deal with many of the laws presented in this week's Torah reading. The rabbis in fact advised us to study these laws of torts and of human failures, translated into negative actions and behavior, in order to sharpen our brains and somehow make us wiser.

And most of the study effort concerns itself with how to deal with the damage and hurt that has already been done and very little time and effort, so to speak, with the moral strength necessary to prevent these very damaging events from occurring.

The Torah is a book of reality. It does not gloss over situations nor is it in the least bit hagiographic in dealing with the main characters that appear in its narrative. The perfect Torah speaks to a very imperfect world. The Torah does not allow us to have illusions about how people will behave when money, emotions, negligence and spite are present in society and in the lives of people.

Slavery is wrong, perhaps the greatest wrong, but it has been a fact of life in human history till and including our time. Slavery breeds inequity and as we have witnessed time and again ending slavery does not in any way end bigotry.

The Torah comes to address the how and why of overcoming this inequity and of making slavery subject to such rigorous legal restraints as to prompt the Talmud to say that he who acquires a slave for himself in reality is acquiring a master for himself.

People will be people, damages and hurts will occur and the temptation of wealth and money will not disappear from the face of this earth. Therefore we have to have a set of rules and an ability to deal with these problems so that they do not completely consume us. The Torah, of necessity, must propose a program of compensation to help the victims and restrain the perpetrators. It is this recognition of human behavior that sets the Torah apart from all other so-called spiritual and religious texts. These assume the best of behavior and values. The Torah makes no such assumption. It is the book of reality and the most holy of all works.

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