

TO THE LETTER OF THE LAW

by Rabbi Raymond Beyda

You shall not cause pain to any widow or orphan. If you dare cause him pain...! - For if he shall cry out to Me I shall surely hear his outcry. My wrath shall blaze... (Shemot 22:21-24)

The portion of Mishpatim is a collection of many different laws. Many of the commandments are those that stress sensitivity to the feelings of others especially the downtrodden. Treatment of the poor, the sick and of orphans and widows is of primary importance to the Torah Jew.

Rabbi Naftali Amsterdam zt'l was a student of Rabbi Yisrael Salanter zt'l. He once told Rabbi Eliyahu Lopian zt'l that he had noticed that his mentor Rabbi Salanter changed his daily routine and was not coming to the Study Hall and the Synagogue as early as he had done in the past. When asked Rabbi Salanter explained, "My wife has brought in a live in helper, who happens to be a widow. I do not want to leave early because she might feel obligated to disturb her sleep in order to lock up behind me. I must be careful not to violate the commandment "Do not cause pain to any widow".

"By the way", added Rabbi Salanter, "One should not suggest that I find a nice and honorable way to release her from our employ and then I could go back to my previous routine. That can't be an option because one who heard that would conclude that one should never hire a widow. That - of course - is wrong!"

That is how our greats lived according to the precepts of the Torah.

In contrast there is a story about a young married student who was very particular to fulfill every mitzvah with all its stringencies. In his first year of marriage his wife requested that they spend the Succot holiday with her mother in Yerushalayim. He agreed and they made the trip arriving just a few hours before the holiday. When he saw the sukkah that his mother-in-law had adjacent to her home he noticed that it did not comply with one of the Rabbinical stringencies required by the great of the generation the Hazon Ish. He knew he could not get back to his home town before the holiday nor did he have time to rebuild the Sukkah to conform to the opinion of the Gedol haDor. Instead, he went to eat and sleep in a neighbor's sukkah.

What was the widow's reaction? She cried all night long. And so did his wife.

A Rabbi who heard about the incident commented, "He keeps the Rabbinical law of the Hazon Ish and violates the Torah commandment not to disturb an orphan or a widow!"

Very often we call a Rabbi because we need a ruling on a Halakhic issue. We cooked some meat

with dairy pots, or some other situation which we know may be a problem but we are not sure what to do. How come we don't make a ruling for ourselves? "I am not a posek (one qualified to rule on Halakhic issues)" would be our quick response. Well, we should all be aware that our treatment of others is also halakhah and we are not qualified to rule on issues of Lashon HaRa, or monetary law and certainly on our treatment of others

The solution is twofold. Choose a highly qualified Rabbi to be your mentor and the one you go to for clarification of Torah law. Second, study laws and also ethics (mussar) so that you will sense that your behavior or situation is one that requires a ruling from one other than yourself. Try and live to the letter of the law not merely as you understand it but also in the manner in which Hashem intended. "Its ways are ways of pleasantness and all of its paths are Peace."

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