

Parshas Mishpatim

INTEGRITY AND SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

The first law after Sinai addresses a Jew who steals, and cannot afford to repay the theft. Such a person is sold into temporary slavery, and the value of his labor accrues until his debt has been paid off. The laws after Sinai open with ואלה המשפטים – And these are the laws... Rashi points out how ו – “and” – continues what was previously said; in this case that these laws are a direct continuation of Sinai.

This is very perplexing. Should the first instructions on becoming fully fledged Jews not be to charge us with being good, kind and responsible for society? The subsequent laws address charity and social responsibility; why aren't they first? Why does the first law the Jews need to know concern a cheating thief?

The Beis Halevi explains that the Torah has a prerequisite for kindness, charity, and social responsibility. The money has to be kosher, and the ingredients properly sourced.

The Jew who steals becomes a slave. He must be treated exceptionally well, and he is not the permanent property of his owner; but nor is he a fully fledged Jew for the duration of his slavery. He is devoid of responsibility to Hashem, and is responsible to his owner. He is allowed to marry a non-Jew in this state, and create a family of slaves who do belong to his owner. Consider that this is what the Torah proscribes as the solution to theft. The Torah terms renouncing Judaism, marrying a non-Jew, and having a family of slaves as being less bad than stealing!

It should be very clear why a law concerning theft comes before the laws regarding Jewish duties and obligations for bettering society and the world at large. The Torah demands high standards of its adherents – the integrity of the individual is paramount to being capable of aiding society.

HOW TO RELATE TO MONEY

Among the first laws given after Sinai, are some interpersonal laws, particularly the laws requiring that the needy are taken care of:

ואם כסף תלוה את עמי את העני עמך... – When you lend money to My people, to the poor person with you.... (22: 24)

Although not readily noticeable in a translation, the phrasing is quite cumbersome, particularly the word עמך – with you – in the context.

The Alshich explains that everything is Hashem's, and merely deposited with us. We are given the privilege of having money in order to distribute it. With this thought, the Torah is imploring us to remember that no matter what we do with our money – **אִם כִּסְפוֹ תִּלְוֶה אֶת עַמִּי** – that **אֶת הָעֲנִי עֲמֵךְ** – it belongs to the poor; it is incidentally with you. We should therefore take great care and responsibility.

The Vilna Gaon explains that the Torah is alluding to a standard monetary law: loans are agreed before witnesses to prevent unscrupulous activity, whereas charity is done in solitude, and no-one needs to know. **אִם כִּסְפוֹ תִּלְוֶה** – When you lend money – **אֶת עַמִּי** – do so before My people; – **אֶת הָעֲנִי** – To the poor however – **עַמְּךָ** – do it alone. The Torah advises the correct way to give charity – in secret. There is a world of difference between being good, and looking good – here the Torah stresses to be good, when no one will ever know.

The Kli Yakar explains that when a person gives charity or a charitable loan, all good deeds and benefits resultant from it are credited to the person who financed the good deeds and actions. The reading would then be – **אִם כִּסְפוֹ תִּלְוֶה אֶת עַמִּי אֶת הָעֲנִי** – If you lend/give money to my people or the needy – **עִמְּךָ** -all the merits that result are “with you” too!

All these novel teachings have a very simple underpinning; money is not meant to be accumulated and stockpiled for personal gain. If people are privileged enough to earn their daily bread, or even more, spread it around, with class. The word for charity, **צדקה**, literally means “justice”. By engaging in charitable pursuits, you are, in a very real way, dispensing a little more justice into the world.

We would all do well to internalise that we do not get rich off the sweat of our brows alone; that we should care for the needy, away from the spotlight too; and that the effects of charity continue to compound long after. If everyone knew that, the world might look quite different.

It starts with one.

Thank you for using gTorah.com