

DARSHANUT

Darshanut, *derived from the Hebrew root darash [explicate, expound], presents the expository, homiletic interpretation of the Bible. Its origins are as old as the most ancient aggadic and midrashic teachings and as new as the sermon or D'var Torah delivered on the most recent Shabbat. The intent is a challenge to relate the Bible to the problems, issues and goals of daily living.*

We encourage our readers to contribute to Darshanut. The submission should be based on the Bible, no more than 750 words in length, and as relevant and current as you would like to make it. For more information on submissions, see the inside back cover.

FROM ENEMY TO FRIEND

THEODORE STEINBERG

The weekly portion known as *Mishpatim* (Ex. 21:1-24:18) is full of laws on diverse matters: slavery, sexual crimes, theft, property, the rights of widows and orphans, moral and religious duties, the religious calendar, and more.

Civilized people live by law. A legal system accomplishes at least two things: One is to spell out and protect the rights and responsibilities of the individual and society. The other is to protect and preserve the fundamental values and aims of the civilization.

Some of the matters dealt with in *Mishpatim* may seem archaic or obsolete. Indentured servitude, for example, is no longer an issue in Western society, but there are reports of thousands and even millions still held in slavery in other parts of the world. Laws pertaining to the seduction of a virgin may seem antiquated in our sexually permissive environment, but perhaps they are not so obsolete. One could argue that much of contemporary permissiveness is a sign of moral decadence.

Some of these laws can be reinterpreted to yield contemporary meaning. The issue of a *goring ox*, for example, and the responsibility of the owner for the damages caused by his animal, can be applied to automobile accidents.

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Another approach to the biblical law code is to look for the larger and more permanent purposes behind the Bible's religious-legal system; not just whether it can be adapted changing conditions, but what kind of culture and person it may help to shape.

Consider this example: *If you see the ass of your enemy falling underneath its burden, and would refrain from helping to raise it, you must nevertheless help to raise it with him (23:5).*

Centuries later, the Midrash told this story based on this verse: Rabbi Alexandrei said: Two mule drivers who were mutual enemies, once were walking near each other on a road. Suddenly, the mule of one of them broke down under its load. The other man saw this and went on ahead. After he had passed by, he suddenly said to himself: "Oh my, what am I doing? It is written in the Torah, if you see the ass of one who hates you, and whom you hate, falling under its burden, you are obligated to stop and help." Immediately, the man turned back and helped his enemy to rearrange the animal's load. After a short while, he began again to think to himself: "My fellow mule driver, whom I've hated all these years, is really not such a bad fellow, but I never knew it." When the work was done, the two men went into a nearby inn and ate and drank together. What caused them to become reconciled? The fact that one remembered a teaching in the Torah.

This is a wonderful story. In one respect, it is a nice, naive parable. It can be modernized by substituting a flat tire or a dead battery for the overburdened mule. But what is it really saying? It shows a fine understanding of human nature, of the human psyche. The Scriptures understood psychology before the time of Freud.

Note the procedure that we have here: Not a general commandment to love one's neighbor, to be nice and helpful even to one's enemies, and hope people will apply this general prescription to specific situations. What we have is just the opposite: A situation arises, a real-life predicament. Someone decides to act, not because he feels kindly disposed towards the man whose animal is in trouble. It is the other way around; he hates the other man. Yet he decides to help because the Torah commands it.

What follows is reconciliation. It is hard to keep hating the man with whom you have just worked together, assisting his animal, or repairing his flat tire. Under such circumstances, hate tends to dissolve and reconciliation begins.

What we have here is a technique in human relations. There are some who say: You should emphasize the right attitudes, and hope that the right actions will follow. The Torah is doing just the opposite: Tell people what to do, condition their habits, spell out the way to behave in a given situation, and trust that the right attitudes will follow.

This is a realistic system. In life situations, in emergencies, when quick action is needed, people usually do not stop to think. There is not time to ask yourself: Should I help, should I not help? Should I call the police? We act on impulse. We follow our instincts. Even philosophers are creatures of habit and impulse more often than they will admit.

Establishing wholesome patterns of behavior is the Torah's pedagogy. Train yourself and others to do the right thing. And the theory, the doctrine, the ideal – will take care of itself.

Of course, it is not always so simple. Nevertheless, it is what the Bible teaches: to guide people to lead decent, honorable lives, touched by a powerful sense of obligation to "turn from evil and do what is right and just."

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