

Yitro: Chasidei Umot HaOlam

- Nisson Shulman.

Ten Commandments: We tend to think of Torah in connection with hukim and mishpatim, but within these categories are all the commandments of hesed, the ethical ideals of Torah. Ramban, the spirit of Torah, Kedoshim tihiyu. The outer shell and inner kernel of each commandment. Examples of our sages' hesed. Sages took a non-Jew, Dama ben Nesina, as the typical example of Hesed. We are expected to lead the way in showing an example. How this plays out in humanity's current crisis.

1. Today's Torah reading contains the Ten Commandments, obviously the central part of our faith.

We tend to think of the Ten Commandments, and indeed the entire Torah, in terms of DINIM, laws, HUKIM UMISHPATIM. Rabbenu Saadya Gaon, teaches us that these commandments are the categories under which all others are classified; the commandment to observe Shabbat, for instance, represents all commandments connected with the calendar, such as the holidays.

2. But behind the laws are the most noble and ethical ideals of Judaism; ideals of ethical behavior taught by these laws. Nahmanides, in his beautiful comment on kedoshim tihiyu, declares that the letter of the law is surely not enough. A person can remain a terrible individual morally and ethically while still observing the letter of the laws, yachol lihiyot naval birshut haTorah; Therefore the Torah requires us to go beyond the letter of the law to become what the laws require of us to be, ethical personalities with a nobility of soul worthy of Moses and of Abraham. Kedoshim tihiyu: Be a mamlechet kohanim vegoy kadosh.

Thus each commandment has a kernel as well as a shell. We must look inside the shell to discover the kernel: beyond the laws to discover their spirit.

3. It isn't enough to observe lo tirtzach, "Do not murder." While not being a murderer, a person may be very far from the ethical personality that is our ideal. One must go far beyond such a Mitzvah. Lo taamod al dam reecha, Do not stand idly by while your neighbor's blood flows, requires us to come to the aid of a persecuted victim; requires us to heal anyone we have the ability to heal; requires us to treat a person with respect so that embarrassment – moral bloodshed – never be caused by us. The man who truly seeks the ideal of Torah must also consider Lama nivra haadam yehidi, the importance of every human personality, and that whoever saves the life of one person is as if he saved the entire world!

4. "Honor thy father and thy mother," is a beautiful commandment. It requires of us certain actions, such as to feed and clothe parents whenever they need it. Reverence for parents involves even more: not to contradict them, not to sit in their place, not to call them by their first name. These are the laws. But the spirit behind these laws teaches us to recognize our parents as partners with God in creation. They shared with Him the offer of the gift of life, and it is we who received that gift from them. Shlosha shutafim yesh baadam, hakadosh baruch hu, veaviv veimo. The spirit of that law sees in the very act of honoring parents, an act of reverence for the

Almighty.

In such a spirit one can rise to great ethical heights, going far beyond the letter of the law in the way in which we honor our parents.

Rav Zundel Salant was seen placing stones in a muddy path... Why? His mother would go that way on her way to shul. The Rav's grandfather, Harav Chaim Soloveitchik zt"l, was asked by a Yeshiva student, that since the Talmud does not require expenditure of money that a person cannot afford in honoring parents, is he freed from visiting them since the train ticket is expensive? "No, he replied, you're not required to spend money on the train ride to visit your father... you can always walk!"

5. It is interesting that our sages, while stressing the laws as the requirement for Jews, also stressed the spirit of those laws as the requirement for all mankind! For hesed, lovingkindness, is universal. Israel is obligated, not only to do hesed, but to teach it as well.

Perhaps that is why, with so many beautiful examples of honoring parents from the lives and conduct of our own sages, the Talmud nevertheless used the example of a non-Jew as the ideal of how far one ought to go in the reverence for parents. Dama ben Nesina, sitting amongst the elders of Rome, when his mother tore off his golden embroidered toga, spat in his face, and dropped a cloth while doing so. And Dama lifted up the cloth to give it back to her. They use him as an example of other incidents of kibud av as well.

They chose a non-Jew as the example to show that hesed must be a universal lesson. All must learn it and practice it.

It is also interesting that when our sages describe the righteous Gentiles, they didn't call them tzadikey umot haolam, but hasidey umot haolam. Undoubtedly there are many righteous Gentiles. But the emphasis is on hasidey umot haolam, those who are not only righteous but compassionate as well. That is the universal ideal.

6. So it is throughout the Torah. Darash Rabbi Samlai: Torah, tehilata gemilat hasadim, vesofa gemilat hasadim (Sota, 14). He does not mean the beginning and the end alone. He means through and through, permeated with loving kindness.

And so it is in Rabbinic legislation. In Masechet Sofrim we find (ch 19) that King Solomon, knowing the power of loving kindness, built two gates into the Holy Temple, one for brides and grooms, the other for mourners. On Shabbat the people of Jerusalem used to go and sit between those two gates, to give joy to the brides and grooms, and to comfort the mourners. When the Temple was destroyed, they instituted the practice that grooms and mourners come to the Synagogue so that the people can receive them with love: the grooms to give them joy, the mourners to give them comfort.

7. It is this sensitivity to hesed which became the second nature of the Jew; which caused him to become the most charitable people on earth; and which caused our sages to consider compassion the most noble ideal of man; and not only compassion for man, but for all the creatures of God.

So that the description of the ideal characteristics of the Jewish people is, that they are rahmanim, bayshanim, and gomley hasadim (Ketuvot 8a).

That is what our sages, like Ramban, consider the spirit of the Torah, not only its law. That is how the goal of Torah is fulfilled, by observing mitzvot, which are to purify our souls so that we become better, nobler, holier people.

Ki amarti, "For I have said", said the Lord, olam hesed yibane, "This world was created for the sake of hesed (Tehilim 89:3).

8. Certainly, at this time of crisis for a part of humanity in Southeast Asia, it behooves us who appreciate Hesed when it comes from non-Jews, to show the way ourselves. There is a great outpouring of Hesed, and we Jews are proud to be among the givers. This crisis appeals to everyone. Our example has always been to remain gomlei hasadim even when others are not, even when the glamour fades and the crisis passes.