

A Taste of Torah

A Life Worth Living

By Rabbi Mordechai Fleisher

Life is precious. That isn't just a cliché; it's an axiom of Torah living. It's a well-known fact that Judaism attaches great value to human life. With certain notable exceptions, one is supposed to transgress a commandment rather than place a life in peril. Similarly, one must put aside a commandment to save the life of another.

In a world whose morals have gone mad, it behooves us to take a few moments to examine why the Torah places such value on human life, and what the ramifications are for our outlook on this vital matter. It is notable that the source of the preciousness of life is found in a discussion of following the Torah's precepts. The Scriptural source for transgressing a mitzvah when a life is at stake is inferred from a verse in this week's Torah reading: "And you shall observe My decrees and My laws, which man shall carry out and by which he shall live." (Leviticus 18:5) The Torah instructs us to live by G-d's commandments, not to die because of

them.

Similarly, when our Sages discuss violating the Shabbos to save a life, it expresses that requirement as follows: "It is preferable to violate one Shabbos so that many subsequent Shabbosos may be observed." (see Shabbos 151b)

The message is quite plain to see: the value attached to human life is the potential to grow and accomplish, to attain spiritual elevation, to become closer to G-d. Sanctity of life is not defined by how much fun one can have or how much meaning one can find; life is precious because we are given the opportunity to perfect ourselves. And perfection is attainable regardless of an individual's health, social status, intellectual abilities, or any other factors that one may view as a reason to forfeit the privilege of life. Every experience in life is an opportunity to come closer to perfection, be it poverty or wealth, suffering or bliss, success or failure. And while society's opinion of a life worth living may change with the times, the Torah's view is unchangeable and immutable.

Ask the Rabbi

Passed-On Punishment

J.B. from The States asks:

Dear Rabbi,

In Ki Sisa, I read that Hashem remembers good deeds for thousands of generations. However, the bad deeds of the current generation are carried onward for three or four generations. This infliction on those who are yet unborn or on those who are not directly responsible for the bad deeds

does not feel right to me. Maybe you could provide some positive thoughts.

Dear J.B.,

I agree with you that punishing innocents for crimes that others have committed doesn't seem fair. The Talmud in Tractate Brachos discusses this issue and resolves it in the following way:

"Behold it says: 'He remembers the

Stories For The Soul

Food for the Soul

Several years ago, just days before Pesach, the Israeli government had called up 30,000 men from the reserves in response to the terrorist threat.

On Erev Pesach, two such soldiers were standing in the Meah Shearim neighborhood of Yerushalayim. Two women who lived there were passing by and overheard the soldiers talking about how incredibly hungry they were. With the situation being what it was and in their haste in gathering so many men, the army hadn't gotten enough food together to feed all the soldiers properly.

These two women went straight to the local religious radio station. Within minutes, an on-air request was made for people to donate food for the soldiers. Many neighborhood women, who had been cooking for days to feed their large families for the duration of Pesach, donated ALL of their food. Their reasoning was that one is allowed to cook on Yom Tov, and they would just cook more on the holiday itself.

Two hours later, army trucks rolled into Meah Shearim filled with soldiers. And that Seder night, there was enough food for over 1,000 soldiers!

"And you shall love your neighbor like yourself..." (Lev. 19:18). If you put yourself in another person's shoes, and think of how you would like to be treated if you were in that situation, it can elevate you to remarkable acts of chesed, loving-kindness.

Adapted with permission from Shul-Week by Rabbi Boruch Lederman.

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Interpersonal Issues

Acceptable Signs for Identifying Lost Objects

A unique measurement is also a valid means of identification. As noted in previous weeks, however, it must be a unique measurement. Identifying an extension cord, for example, as being ten feet long is not sufficient, since this is a common length.

Identifying a length of rope as 17 1/2 feet, an unusual length, would be valid.

Adapted with permission from "The Halachos of Other People's Money" by Rabbi Pinchas Bodner (Feldheim Publishers)

Ask the Rabbi

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sins of the fathers upon the children (Shemos 34:7) and it says: 'And the children shall not die on account of their fathers (Devarim 24:16).' These verses apparently contradict one another, but we reconcile them by saying that 'there is no difficulty,' one [Shemos] is talking about when they are still holding on to the ways of their parents and one [Devarim] is referring to when they are not holding on to the ways of their parents."

So, according to the Talmud, the verse that was troubling you is referring to children or grandchildren that are continuing in their parents' ways. In the Book of Samuel II, there is an example of this. At first glance the incident is a very troubling one.

We are taught that there was a famine during the reign of King David and that he was told that the reason for the famine was partially in response for the killing of Gibeonites by the house of King Saul. The Gibeonites were a tribe of Amorites who had tricked the Israelites at the beginning of the conquest of Israel into making a treaty with them. They masqueraded as a nomadic tribe from far-away, and the treaty was ratified. Shortly afterward, the Israelites discovered the ruse and responded by making the Gibeonites a caste of wood-choppers and water-carriers. They chiefly served the Priests. It was apparently when the

Priestly city of Nov was decimated by Saul for supposed insurrection that the Gibeonites were slaughtered. King David asked the Gibeonites how they could be mollified. They responded by asking that seven members of the house of Saul be hung at his former royal residence. King David complied.

There are many troubling issues that this passage presents, but by far the most troubling is the killing of innocent people for the crime of Saul. The Malbim in his commentary on the Books of the Prophets explains that what actually happened was that after the supposed insurrection at Nov, the Gibeonites became an oppressed class, and were continuously harassed, chiefly by the House of Saul. These members of the former Royal House persisted in the ways of their grandfather and were thus punished. The message was that the harassment will no longer be tolerated, no matter who the perpetrator is, even if he is a member of the aristocracy.

There are many people who feel that they are not responsible for their actions because they were raised in an environment that caused them to do what they did. The Torah tells us otherwise. We make the choices and we are responsible for the outcome.

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