

Parsha Ki Teitzei

Chapters 21 v.10 - 25

We are about halfway in to the last book of the Torah and our parsha is called Ki Teitzei, which is translated as “going forth”. These chapters are part of Moses’ Second Discourse, and in it is contained the Code of Laws dealing with Domestic Life and Human Kindness. There are 38 different groupings in this code and there are more mitzvot in this parsha than in any other. Many of the laws were intended to separate and define the Israelites from the other tribes in the region, and that concept of separation and uniqueness would be the key lesson for today. In the time of the Israelite wanderings in the desert, God, thru Moses and others, needed to remind the Children of Israel that they were God’s Chosen People and had to be held to a different and higher standard. There was the fear that assimilation would result in the extinction of the Jewish Race. In this day and age, the possibility of extinction seems remote, but the concern that assimilation will reduce a person’s “Jewishness” is a valid concern.

I will select various mitzvot for you to consider.

Israelite parents were particularly affectionate and even indulgent. While the Greeks were known to leave the weak alone to die, and a Roman father could have his grown son put to death, an incorrigible Israelite son would have to be tried by the elders who only then could consider his death by stoning.

There are four acceptable means of execution: stoning, burning, the sword, or strangulation, but burial is the only acceptable Jewish way to dispose of the dead, i.e. cremation is not acceptable.

Let’s continue on. Yoking an ox and a horse together is not acceptable because the burden would be unequal. Overloading a single animal is also a sin. If one sees an animal that is struggling with its burden, it is your duty to assist it. Kindness to animals is unique in Jewish law although they were routinely sacrificed. Bimbam.com says that the way we treat plants and animals is the key to our survival. They are a precious resource, and being at the top of the food chain, we cannot afford to mismanage this resource. While it may be obvious to us now that we cannot overfish or deforest the land, that was not so obvious a few thousand years ago. The mitzvah in this parsha describes a situation where we come upon a bird’s nest that contains the mother, several chicks and several eggs. We need the chicks and the eggs for food, so what is our correct response? The Torah says that we must shoo the mother bird from the nest before taking the chicks and the eggs, because this will allow the mother bird to mate and lay

eggs again, thus perpetuating the cycle of life. Doing anything else would be a sin.

Let's look at a few other rules. Fugitive slaves were not to be returned to their masters. This differs significantly from Greek and Roman tradition, as well as the practice as it existed in the United States prior to the end of the Civil War.

You must pay a worker on time and you must allow him time to eat while on the job. You could not charge interest if you lent money to a fellow Israelite.

Certain rules pertaining to marriage and divorce are presented. Several scenarios relating to adultery are presented. In most cases, the punishment for an adulterer, either man or woman, was death by stoning. The punishment for rape appears to be much less severe than in our modern era. Divorce was a document prepared to allow a man to dissolve his marriage; I am sure most of you are aware that the wife had no similar recourse in this male-dominated society. In today's world, I suspect the rules are similar among Orthodox and some Conservative Jews, but they are not followed by Reform and Reconstructionist Jews who hold men and women as equals.

A few other rules are presented in the parsha.

A family was not held responsible for the sins of an individual, although I suspect that there was a level of guilt by association that took generations to cleanse.

Because the Israelites endured slavery in Egypt, they were reminded to give due justice to the stranger, widow and orphan. Washing a stranger's feet and inviting him into your tent was a common practice.

Excessive punishment or torture was not permitted.

Five verses are needed to describe the importance of a brother marrying his brother's wife in the event of his death if they are childless to ensure that the deceased brother's name be perpetuated. This is called a Levirate marriage.

In order to promote fair business and trade, you are reminded to have honest and equal weights and measures for all transactions.

The parsha concludes by reminding the Israelites what the Amalekites did to them as they left Egypt, attacking and killing the weak and feeble at the rear of the column. And although the Israelites prevailed in those battles, God swore that he would blot out the remembrance of the Amalekites forever. I am reminded of the following two instances: first, Haman, the evil man in the Book of Esther, was considered to be an Amalekite, and second, I remember reading that when King Saul failed to kill the Amalekite king

after battle, God lost faith in him. Although Saul's army killed every soldier in the battle, Saul could not kill the king per God's command. So without God's help, Saul and his sons died in their next battle against the Philistines.

To summarize this parsha, taken as a whole, following these mitzvot made the Children of Israel different from their neighbors. Moses' Three Discourses in the Book of Deuteronomy are intended to summarize the history OF the Children of Israel after leaving Egypt TO the Children of Israel so they can recognize themselves as being a unique civilization and the burden to maintain that uniqueness forever.

The Haftarah again comes from Isaiah. As I mentioned last month, there are seven "Haftarahs of Consolation" read on the seven weeks following the Fast of Tishe B'Av. This is the fifth one and comes from chapter 44. Following the Torah's laws concerning human kindness, Isaiah reminds his countrymen that God will exhibit everlasting kindness and compassion to them no matter what happens to them, and that they have a sacred duty to imitate God's loving kindness. The parsha's rules regarding fairness and compassion provide a link to this Haftarah.