



SERMON RESOURCE FOR SHLUCHIM
משפטים / MISHPATIM
THE IMPORTANCE OF SHAME

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PARSHA:


משפטים / MISHPATIM

SERMON TITLE:

THE IMPORTANCE OF SHAME

A PROJECT OF THE SHLUCHIM OFFICE

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MISHPATIM

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A ganav, or “ganif,” as we say in Yiddish, is one of the most popular words. Even people who don’t speak Yiddish know this word.

It’s a Hebrew word that’s also used in Yiddish. This word has even made its way into the German dictionary—in German today, they say “ganuvim,” or thieves.

This week’s Torah portion begins with a somewhat strange law. The Torah tells us about the eved Ivri—a Jew who stole money, was caught, brought to court and tried, and required to return the stolen money. However, he didn’t have the money—so the Torah says that in such a case, the thief is sold into slavery. In essence, a reputable family is found for him to employ him, and there he learns how to be a productive person—and with the profits of his sale, the stolen money is returned.

But this is apparently not at all understood. How can it be that the very first mitzvah given to the Jews immediately after the Giving of the Torah concerns a thief? Could the Torah portion not start with the loftier mitzvos mentioned elsewhere in the portion, such as to love the convert to Judaism, to have mercy on



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the orphan and widow, to loan money to the poor? There are so many positive mitzvos, and even more practical and doable mitzvos—why start with the negative, humiliating subject of a Jewish thief? Especially when it's right after the Giving of the Torah when the subject of stealing wasn't relevant at all—all Jews were rich at the time and no one needed to steal. And even if one did steal, he'd be able to pay it back. So why does the parshah begin with the thief?

There are several explanations.

One of the things the Torah wanted to teach us immediately after Matan Torah, the Giving of the Torah, was that even the most marginal person, who has stooped to such a low level that he is caught stealing and must be sold as a slave, even such a person has rights which must be protected. Even he deserves interpersonal relationships, and we have an obligation to protect his dignity. Even such a person may not be humiliated and must be treated with kindness and mercy. That's why the Torah portion chose to begin specifically with the lowliest person—to teach us a leading principle in the Torah: how far one must go to respect another for the mere fact that he or she is a human being.

But there's something deeper here.

We find a unique law in the parshah about the thief: if a thief is caught with the stolen goods, he must pay back the principle and additionally pay a fine.



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On the other hand, an armed robber who goes into a bank and robs the teller and is caught, the Torah obligates him to return what he stole—but not to pay a fine.

The obvious question is asked: what is worse about the thief who must pay back both the principle and a fine equaling the principle, as opposed to the armed robber?

The Talmud (Tractate Bava Kama 79b) explains: An armed robber does his deed out in the open, in the middle of the day. He doesn't try to hide from sight; he has a certain measure of honesty—everyone, including the armed robber, knows what an armed robber is and what consequences may be faced after the deed is done.

A thief, on the other hand, is a person who will not or cannot admit that he does such things. Just the opposite—he'll play the part of an upright, lovable human being... but he'll stab you in the back. At night, shrouded in secrecy and darkness, he does his deeds.

One can protect himself against an armed robber—you at least know what you're dealing with. A thief, on the other hand, can be someone whom you think is your best friend. And therefore, since the thief misleads everyone, he is doubly guilty: he steals from everyone, and he fools everyone. That's why he must also pay a fine.



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Additionally, the thief is afraid of people—but he's not afraid of G-d. He merely "forgets" that there is an Eye that Sees and an Ear that Hears, even in the darkest of night. That's why he pays a fine.

The Rebbe explains that when we contemplate the concept behind the behavior of the thief, we discover that it's not just applicable to the thief but to every one of us who has ever committed an immoral act. Before we do it, we look both ways and make sure that no one is watching us. For example, if someone gossips about his friend, he'll never do it in his friend's face. To his friend himself, he'll only have praises and compliments—only behind his back will he spew gossip. Essentially, this makes him a thief—someone who does his deeds secretly. He's not prepared to confess to his behavior.

Another example is the guy who loves telling mother-in-law jokes—but he'll never tell a mother-in-law joke in front of his mother-in-law, unless he wants to get in trouble.

It is said that Rabbi Yochanan Ben-Zakkai lived to 120. Before his passing, he disciples gathered around him and asked him, "Master! Please bless us!" He said to them: "May it be G-d's Will that the Fear of Heaven be upon you the same as the fear of flesh and blood"—to be afraid of G-d at least the same as you are afraid of other people.



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The disciples were very offended: That's what he tells us before he passes on?! That's something appropriate for a kid in Fifth Grade: to fear G-d at least as much as you fear your teacher. But to the disciples of the great Rabbi Yochanan Ben-Zakkai?!

Rabbi Yochanan Ben-Zakkai responded to them: "When a man sins, he says, 'No one should see me.' "

When another person is around, we behave as we should: we feel embarrassed to do a lot of things.

Here's a more practical example: When a man comes to shul with his wife, his conduct is far more dignified than when he comes by himself. Why? Because since he knows there's an "eye that sees," even if there is a partition between the men and women, he knows well that his wife knows how he's acting—which is why he behaves like a good boy.

What Rabbi Yochanan Ben-Zakkai was saying was: At least fear G-d as much as you fear your wife—feel that G-d is also in the room.

But what Rabbi Yochanan really gave his disciples was a truly great blessing—an important present unlike anything else.

We constantly go around worried: worried about work, worried about kids, worried about health, worried about parents. Jews worry all day.



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But when a person has this sense that G-d is in his presence, he or she doesn't worry so much. We all believe that G-d watches us. But only a number of people have this sense that G-d is right there with us, walking at our side and holding our hand, leaving us with nothing at all to worry about.

It's like a person going into an important business meeting feeling very pressured—when he suddenly sees someone he knows and immediately feels more relaxed. All the pressure goes down and he starts smiling. A child whose daddy is right next to him doesn't worry—he knows that someone is protecting him. This feeling is what Rabbi Yochanan wanted to give his disciples—for them to feel that G-d is right there in their lives, in tangible form just like a person in the room.

When your surrounds yourself with this feeling, your quality of life is sure to completely change—for the better.