

## Ki Teitzei – Friday, August 28, 2020

Maimonides is credited with developing the definitive list of commandments in the Torah, 613 by his reckoning, and it turns out that this week's parsha, Ki Teitzei, late in the last book of the Torah, helped accelerate his count, with 74 of the 613 commandments listed in just this one parsha.

The range is huge, sometimes repeating and expanding on earlier mitzvot and then extending into so many new areas, a huge patchwork of mitzvot that have no apparent connection between one and another. And some are glorious and inspiring, others horrific and unexplainable.

So, we read the beautiful language of lovingkindness – the laws of harvest again, how we are not to go back to collect the sheaf that was missed, how we are not to pick all of the fruit of the olive tree nor pick up the dropped grapes in our vineyards, all to be left for the stranger, the orphan and the widow. Or the kind laws on how we are to bury the executed criminal, which has become the basis of our universal commitment to bury anyone who dies. Or the laws that protect women captured in war from rape, but instead to treat them with respect with a path towards marriage. Or to pay workers on time, no matter whether they are Israelites or foreign workers. Or even the Levirate laws, where a married man dies and his brother takes on the obligation to marry his widow, so that she is cared for.

These are the laws that make us proud of being Jewish and a light upon the world.

But then there are the unfathomable mitzvot: Brides who are not virgins can be stoned to death. Illegitimate children are barred 10 generations down from being part of k'lal Yisrael. And then there is the law of how parents are to deal with a rebellious son – to take him to the elders, declare that he is wayward, rebellious and disobedient, a glutton and a guzzler...and for that he is to be stoned to death by all the men of the city.

I have no words, when I read of these commandments. These aren't ritual commandments that we might, as Reform Jews, set aside as irrelevant today. Rather, these are ethical commandments, the part of the Torah that even Reform Jews are encouraged to honour. On the one hand, we see love and kindness for strangers, widows and orphans. And on the other hand, one line before or one line after, we are stoning women and children, and barring children for generations because of the misdeeds of their parents.

Talmudic sages suggest, hundreds of years later, that well, children were never really stoned, but that of course opens up that whole question, why would the Torah list commandments that weren't really meant to be followed. And why do those sages get to pick and choose which ethical laws ones mean something and which ones don't.

If anything, the astonishing array of commandments in this parsha point to a way of life in a different era, well before the Talmud's careful examination of the Torah many centuries after it was written. If the writers of the Talmud struggled with the morality of some of these mitzvot, I'd suggest that we are open to do the same, 1600 years later, as we enter the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Ethical monotheism has been the central tenet of Reform Judaism since its inception 200 years ago. So, what are ethics? The best definitions suggest that ethics create a system that helps us find the best ways to act so that each of us may live a long, productive life, and invoke ideas of universal fairness. History tells us, though, that ethics are not static. They will evolve over time, as society changes.

The Torah's tolerance of slavery is long gone. The 40 lashes authorized in this parsha – also long gone. The dominant role of men over “their” women, all over this parsha – is also gone, in this case more recently, at least in Reform Judaism. And the stoning of non-virgin brides or disobedient children, well, seriously.

This parsha essentially provides the key to the mystery of how we, as Reform Jews are challenged to read the Torah. We simply can't hold all 74 mitzvot in our hands and say, yes and yes and yes 74 times, not with this list. And so it is that our movement states clearly, that we are urged to be selective about our observance of mitzvot and to hold clear in our minds and our hearts that not everything in our tradition is sacred and binding. In a changing world, our Judaism changes. By not following blindly what is written, we are challenged to find meaning in the Torah, most certainly a more difficult path than simple compliance.

But in so doing, we discover that the Torah provides us with incredible tools for life, both ritual and ethical, but it is left to us to choose the tools that we need, to leave some behind, and to reinterpret others to help us give meaning in our lives. And so, we come to see the Torah not as a static document, but something that lives, breathes and changes, much as we do, the greatest gift, the Torah as an Etz Chayim, truly the tree of life.

Shabbat shalom.