



Shabbat Table Talk

Parashat Ki Teitzei – Erev Shabbat 24 August 2018

Torah portion: Deuteronomy 21:10-25:19

Haftarah: Isaiah 54:1-55:5

In Parashat Ki Teitzei, Moses gives the laws regarding individuals, their families and their neighbors. This is in contrast with the preceding chapters where Moses exhorts the Israelites to obey laws regarding public officials and the nation and on the laws regarding the sanctuary and the rites and festivals celebrated within it as part of their preparation to enter the Promised Land.

The parashat has seventy-four of the Torah's 613 commandments (mitzvot). They include specific rules on family relationships and daily living; and on interpersonal ethics, justice, responsibility, work and sexuality.

The first of these are the three family laws (Deut 21:10-21) on marriage with a woman captured in war, the right of the firstborn in a polygamous family and on punishment of an insubordinate son. These are followed by the laws on the body of executed criminal (vv 22-23).

There are laws on marital and sexual misconduct specifically on premarital chastity, false accusation, tassels of garments, true accusations and forbidden relationships (23:1-9; 24:1-4).

There are also miscellaneous domestic laws dealing with property, domestic animals, clothing, houses and vineyard (22:1-2) and on the sanctity of the military camps, asylum for escaped prisoners, lending of interest, timely fulfillment of vows, what creditors may not seize, fair wages, proper weights and measures and gleanings for the poor.

The parashat ends with the seemingly contradictory commandments to “obliterate the remembrance of Amalek from the heavens” and “not forget!”

There are wide-ranging topics in the parashat and most are far from self-explanatory and may need lengthy discussion and interpretation. Is there rhyme and the reason? Is there a running thread? I agree with a comment in the Etz Hayim that one theme is prominent in the parashat: “the irreducible dignity of the human being.” Even those considered as marginal members of society, such as the executed criminal, the female war captive, the escaped slave, the poor who could pay his/her debt or the hungry who depend on gleanings are to be treated with dignity as they are fashioned in the image of God and are to be treated accordingly.

The commandment regarding the Amalek may also give us a hint of what the parashat is all about. Amalek was an ancient biblical nation living near the land of Canaan. The Amalekites were the first to attack the Israelites who were “faint and weary” recuperating from their escape from Egypt. They made a surprise attack on the Israelites and killed the old, the weak and the infirm. Because of this and despite the miracle of the ten plagues, the parting of the sea and the escape from Egypt, some Israelites in their sadness and suffering (they were also thirsty and hungry) doubted and asked: Is God among us?

The Amalek is long gone. But it is seen as the essence of baseless, irrational indifference. What it represents constitutes the archenemy of the Jewish people and their mission in life. How is one to respond to Amalek? How does one deal with apathy, cynicism or doubt? The answer found in the parashat is simply one word: *Zachor* (Remember).

To remember includes to remember what God has done and what the Amalek did to the old, weak and infirm. It is a command to keep faith in God's mercy and to be thankful for our blessings. It is also a command to be merciful for others especially those in need.

Today, gemilut chassadim, literally meaning “the giving of loving-kindness” is a mitzvah (a command) in the everyday life of Jews. It is also a commandment for Christians. Some examples of gemilut chassadim are the ones enumerated in Matthew's Gospel: clothe the naked, feed the hungry, visit the sick, bury the dead, comfort mourners, among others.

Reflection and Discussion: 1) What do you consider to be the biggest commandment of God regarding your family and neighbors? 2) What is the hardest commandment to fulfill? 3) What's your most recent act of loving kindness, for whom?

Bibliography: Etz Hayim: Torah and Commentary (New York, 2001), The Catholic Study Bible, New American Bible Revised Edition (Oxford, New York, 2011) and <http://www.chabad.org>.

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