



Mishpatim– Remembering Your Past in the Midst of Your Present

Rabbi Shmuel Silber

*“And you shall be holy people to Me, and flesh torn in the field you shall not eat; you shall throw it to the dog[s]
(Exodus 22:30).”*

Among the various laws concerning property, damages and interpersonal conduct the Torah tells us the law of the “treyfa;” the animal killed by another. This animal which died without proper shechita (ritual slaughter) is prohibited for consumption. But why must the Torah state, “you shall throw it to the dog?” As long as I don’t eat of the carcass what does it matter what I do with it? Why must the Torah tell me how to dispose of the dead animal?

Rashi explains, that the Torah is teaching us that God does not “forget” to reward even the smallest of His creations. The Torah tells us that when the Jewish people left Egypt, “no dog shall whet its tongue against man or beast (Exodus 11:7).” The dogs did not bark on that momentous night of the exodus and as a reward, God commands us to give the carcass to the dog.

There is another approach. The Chizkuni (Chizkiyah ben Manoach, 13th century French Rabbi) and the Daas Zikneyim (commentary of the Tosafists) make an interesting observation. The Torah does not say, L’Kelev, which would translate as “to a dog,” rather, it says, “La’ Kelev,” which translates as “to the dog.” To which dog is the Torah referring? The sheepdog; the dog that was supposed to guard the flock. The “treyfa” occurs because a predatory animal infiltrated the flock and the dog that was supposed to ward off such an attack did not perform its job. And so, God says, “give the torn flesh to the dog who was supposed to be guarding the flock.” But why? Why should I reward the dog for failing? The commentaries explain that in this moment when your trusted companion failed you, try to remember all of the times he came through. This dog may have protected your livestock for weeks, months, maybe even years without fail. This dog did its job on so many previous occasions. In this moment of failure, remember your canine companion’s accomplishments.

I believe the Torah is teaching us an incredible lesson in human relationships. If there is one thing that is a surety in our life relationships it is that the people we love will inevitably fail us at some point. Sometimes, the failures are major and irreparable and other times they are minor and can be addressed. Relationships between human beings cannot escape the reality of human error and finitude. It is often in these moments of failure that we become fully focused on the relationship trespass in front of us and lose sight and perspective of all that came before. We become fully absorbed in our present pain and we forget that this other person has been compassionate, loving and nurturing to me in the past. A husband and wife have an argument and each becomes so consumed by the anger and resentment of the present that they forget the beautiful memories, they forget the times when the other was supportive and loving. One mistake, one misstep by one spouse can sometimes cause the other to overlook and “forget” about so much good. A friend is unable to be there for me in a time of need or says something I don’t like and in a moment a meaningful bond of friendship is broken. No attention is given to the relationship history – we make our decisions based on the here and now. We are present-focused beings who often lose site of the historical continuum of our relationships.

God commands us to remember the commitment and dedication of the sheepdog in the very moment he fails me. I give him the meat as a token of my appreciation for all he has done for me and my flock.

Let us find the strength to remember and appreciate the good, the love and the commitment of the people in our lives even during the moments of failure, hurt and pain.