



THE WILL OF THE DIVINE

WE ARE VERY CONSCIOUS OF OUR PERSONAL NEEDS, AS A PHYSICAL being with, in addition certain, psychological requirements. Most of us desire, in one way or another, health, freedom and fulfilment. Our human plane of existence is the chief focus of our attention. In fact, many of us are primarily concerned about our own selves.

The Torah comes from Sinai. It is a Divine teaching, and seeks to broaden and elevate our perspective. The first step is that even on the physical plane, we have to make room for other people. We have responsibilities towards them, and sometimes their needs have to come first. The Sedra¹ presents a number of laws which concern our daily relationships with others.

Some of these laws are phrased in terms which relate to the farming communities of ancient Israel:

If a man's ox gores the ox of another man, and kills it, the value of the living and dead ox should be divided between the two owners. But if it was known previously that this is a goring ox, which should have been guarded, and its owner did not do so, then the owner should pay full compensation².

In some cases Jewish legal texts tell us that we follow today's local conventions of business and civil law. In others the Torah

concept can be translated into contemporary forms. However, it is clear that the Sedra is telling us in general that other people matter, and that so does the property which belongs to them. Each one of us has to ensure that we are protecting the wellbeing of others. The owner of the dangerous ox should have looked after it more carefully.

Yet there is a further way of understanding what the Sedra is saying. Infinitely beyond our human plane is that of the Divine. G-d is the essence of all existence, and the Divine Will is the essential reality of the universe.

The Sedra gives us a glimpse of the Divine Will, as it is expressed in terms of worldly practicalities. In itself the Divine Will is immeasurably exalted. The very idea is awesome: G-d, the creator of All, desires a certain pattern of behaviour in the universe. He imposes this without choice on every star, planet, animal, bird, fish and plant. Yet, to humanity, G-d grants Free Will. We alone have the choice whether or not to implement the Divine Will in our lives.

The Sedra reveals the Divine Will as it is expressed in terms of situations which could be found in pre-modern farming communities, with also many points directly relevant to our lives today. Studying the Divine Will and seeking to understand its workings is the privilege of the Jew.

The legal topics in our Sedra are explored in great depth in the Mishnah and Talmud. These laws are the Will and Wisdom of G-d: it is His Divine Will that when such-and-such an event takes place, the law is decided in such-and-such a way. It might be that some of the situations described are rare in our time, or indeed at *any* time³. Nonetheless, the fact that the Torah defines the law, and that we are able to study it in all its details, brings us closer to the Divine. Through His beautiful Torah, G-d is giving us access to the essential spiritual reality of all being.

1. Exodus chs.21-24. 2. Free translation of Ex .21:354. 3. See Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi's *Tanya*, Part I ch.5.

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SEDRA MISHPATIM

BORROWING AND TAKING CARE

Nathan Bergman burst into his classroom on Tuesday morning, a fresh and excited look on his face.

“Josh!” he called to his best friend, “Come here and take a look!” Josh Levy hurried over and peered into the bag Nathan was holding. Inside was a brand new expensive-looking remote control car!

“WOW, man, this is awesome stuff! Where did you get it?!” Josh exclaimed.

“I saved up for it,” Nathan said, “All my Chanukah money and weekly allowance...finally...bought me...”... Nathan paused dramatically, holding his hands up in the air, “my Dream... Come.... Truuuuue!!” Josh burst out laughing. Nathan sure was excited about his new car. Just then the bell rang for lessons...

Later that day saw the two boys sitting on the couch in Nathan’s house, intensely involved with the car. They set up a whole route for it to negotiate, with obstacles and bridges, built from furniture and bits and pieces. Right, left, back, around, U-turn, back again, left, spin around. The boys took just couldn’t get enough of it. Nathan told Josh that they would play with the car at Nathan’s home for the next two evenings, but Josh could borrow it for Thursday night if he wanted, since Nathan had to visit his grandmother. Josh happily accepted the offer. He was overjoyed.

Sure enough, on Thursday morning, Nathan brought the car to school again and at the end of the day, he handed it to Josh.

“Have fun with it, man. Be careful with it.” “Thanks so much, Nathan,” Josh said, “and don’t worry I will take extremely good care of it. You can count on me!”

That evening, Josh spent a long time driving the car all around his house. He set up a route even more twisty than the one in Nathan’s home. It was great fun driving it up and down and through the difficult, steep turns. Suddenly, he lost his grip of the remote and the car swerved sharply and fell nose down off the dining room table. There was a horrible crunching sound, then silence.

Josh froze. Uh oh, he thought, this isn’t good. Not good at all. When he saw the smashed front of the car, he felt he was about to cry. How was he going to explain this to Nathan? He would be so upset. And he would be so angry with Josh. At that moment his father, Mr Levy, walked into the room.

“Why the long face, Josh?” he asked. Josh showed him the broken car and explained how it was borrowed from Nathan and how he had promised to take care of it. “Oh, dear, it doesn’t look too good. He might need to get a new one.” Mr Levy said, trying the controls. The car was silent.

Josh sighed. “I broke it and I should pay for it. You know, in Sedra class we learnt that in Sedra Mishpatim, it talks about all kinds of laws regarding lending and borrowing. And it says that if someone borrows an object and it accidentally gets broken, the borrower must pay for it. So... I guess it’s all on me,” he smiled wanly. “I have money saved up that I can use.”

“Wow, Josh...” his father said. “I’m very proud of you for doing the right thing. It takes courage to accept the responsibility. So, please allow me chip in with some money.” He pulled out his wallet and gave Josh some cash.

“Thanks Dad. You’re the best.” Josh took the money gratefully. But, even so, tomorrow he would have to face Nathan...

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