

Last week, the parasha Yitro, introduced the Ten Commandments. Ten obvious rules to codify how we live with one another in society. While they seem so obvious today, their mere simplicity is the underpinning of relationships, respect for other people and their property; simple effective words to live by. This week, the parasha Mishpatim begins with G-d speaking to Moses, and saying: “These are the rules you shall set before them” and thus begins a recitation of 52 of the 613 mitzvot, mentioned in this parasha. There are details on how to deal with Jewish slaves, Jewish maidservants, murder, injuring a parent, kidnapping, cursing a parent – that is just in the first aliyah of the reading. We continue with rules about killing or injuring slaves, personal damages, the killer ox, a hole in the ground, damages by goring, and penalties for stealing. We learn of damages by grazing and by fire, paid and unpaid custodians, borrowing an article, seduction, occult practices, idolatry, and lending money. We’ll come back to that one in a few moments.

The parasha continues with more rules on accepting authority, and on animals that have strayed or have fallen. We learn rules about justice, the Sabbatical year, Shabbat, Pesach, Shavuot, Succot, and kashrut. Rules upon rules, guiding us in our relationships in society. While, today, we are not likely to learn of a neighbor who has been gored by an ox, we learn from these old rules that we need to treat one another with compassion, respect, and caring. Those are precepts that never go out of style and remain as relevant today as they were when our people were wandering in the desert. Lessons that are too easily forgotten in modern times.

The rule that stands out for me is found in Chapter 22, verse 24. *If you lend money to my people, to the poor among you, do not act toward them as a creditor, exact no interest from them.* It is from this verse that the Jewish Free loan societies have taken their mission and we are so lucky to have such an agency in Buffalo, the Hebrew Benevolent Loan Association. HBLA is approaching its 120th anniversary; 120 years of making loans to the Jews of the 8 counties of Western New York; 120 years of offering a hand up, not a hand out; of helping those among us with privacy and dignity. Unless a member sits on the loan interview, the identity of the borrower remains unknown to the rest of the board. We have given loans for

education, home repairs and maintenance, weddings and b'nai mitzvah celebrations, adoptions, car purchases and repairs, trips to Israel, and summers at camp. We are far away from the days of lending money to the new immigrant to buy the load for his pushcart, but the principle remains the same. Helping and caring, offering respect, and dignity to the borrower. Buffalo is one city that has a free loan association, and we are one of the smallest. Los Angeles, New York City, Philadelphia, Atlanta, Baltimore, Washington, D.C., Portland in both Maine and Oregon, to name a few. And here we are, in Buffalo, boasting a society that has performed more mitzvot than we can count.

Giving tzedakah anonymously to a fund that helps a fellow Jew is a true mitzvah. Rambam talked about the ladder of giving, and this level is the highest. To help a community member, but not know who has received that help, that helps the donor climb that ladder of giving and secure a place in the world to come, while making this world a better one. Membership in HBLA is available as an annual basis or for a lifetime. Those fees are what enable HBLA to make all those interest free loans. I am so proud not only to be a member, but to be the immediate past president. Every day someone in Buffalo is helped with money from this agency. To know that I am part of that chain of giving is a good feeling.

Shabbat shalom!