

Lessons from the Ganif

The Parsha right after the Giving of the Torah begins with laws for the Jewish thief. Was there no better way to kick off our journey into Judaism?

Why the First Mitzvah?

A ganav, or “ganif,” as we say in Yiddish, is one of the most popular words. Even people who don’t speak Yiddish know this word. It’s a Hebrew word that’s also used in Yiddish. It has even made its way into the German dictionary—in German today, they call thieves “ganuvim.”

This week’s Torah portion begins with a somewhat strange law. The Torah tells us about the Eved Ivri, a Hebrew slave. If a Jew stole money and was caught, he would be brought to court and tried, and required to return the stolen money. If he didn’t have the money, he would be sold into slavery. In essence, a reputable family would be found to employ him, and he would learn there how to be a productive person—and with the profits of his sale, the stolen money would be returned.

But why is the very first mitzvah given to the Jews immediately after the Giving of the Torah concerning a thief? Could the Torah portion not start with the loftier mitzvos mentioned elsewhere in the portion, such as to love the convert to Judaism, to have mercy on the orphan and widow, to loan money to the poor? There are so many positive mitzvos, and even more practical and doable mitzvos—why start with the negative,

humiliating subject of a Jewish thief? Especially when it's right after the Giving of the Torah when the subject of stealing wasn't relevant at all—all Jews were rich at the time and no one needed to steal. And even if he did steal, he'd be able to pay it back. So why does the parshah begin with the thief?

Torah wanted to teach us an important lesson immediately after Matan Torah: That even the most marginal person, who has stooped to the level of stealing and must be sold as a slave—even he has rights which must be protected. Even he deserves interpersonal relationships, and we have an obligation to protect his dignity. Even such a person may not be humiliated and must be treated with kindness and mercy. That's why the Torah portion begins specifically with the lowliest person—to teach us a leading principle in the Torah: how far one must go to respect another for the mere fact that he or she is a human being.

What's Worse, the Thief or Armed Robber?

But there's something deeper here.

We find a unique law in the parshah about the thief: if a thief is caught with the stolen goods, he must pay back the principle and also pay a fine. On the other hand, if an armed robber goes into a bank and robs the teller, the Torah obligates him to return what he stole—but not to pay a fine.

The obvious question is: why is the thief worse than the armed robber?

The Talmud (Tractate Bava Kama 79b) explains: An armed

robber does his deed out in the open, in the middle of the day. He doesn't try to hide from sight; he has a certain measure of honesty—everyone, including the armed robber, knows what an armed robber is and what consequences may be faced after the deed is done.

A thief, on the other hand, is a person who will not or cannot admit that he does such things. Just the opposite—he'll play the part of an upright, lovable human being... but he'll stab you in the back. At night, shrouded in secrecy and darkness, he'll do his deeds.

You can protect yourself against an armed robber—at least know what you're dealing with. A thief, on the other hand, can be someone whom you think is your best friend. And since the thief misleads everyone, he is doubly guilty: he steals from everyone, and fools everyone. That's why he must also pay a fine.

There is also another difference. The thief is afraid of people—but he's not afraid of G-d. He doesn't forget about the people that might see him; he takes great care to hide his actions. But he does forgets that there is an Eye that Sees and an Ear that Hears, even in the darkest of night. That's why he pays a fine.

Fear G-d Like You Fear Your Wife

The Rebbe explains that when we contemplate the behavior of the thief, we discover that it's not just applicable to the thief but to every one of us who has ever committed an immoral act. Before we do it, we look both ways and make sure that no one

is watching us. For example, if we gossip about a friend, we'll never do it in his face. To the friend himself, we'll only have praises and compliments—only behind his back will we gossip. Essentially, this makes me a thief—someone who does his deeds secretly and is not prepared to confess to his behavior. A guy might love telling mother-in-law jokes—but he'll never tell a mother-in-law joke in front of his mother-in-law, unless he wants to get in trouble.

Rabbi Yochanan Ben-Zakkai, one of the great sages of the Mishnah, lived to 120. Before his passing, his disciples gathered around him and asked him, “Master! Please bless us!” He said to them: “May it be G-d’s Will that the Fear of Heaven be upon you the same as the fear of flesh and blood”—you should be afraid of G-d at least as much as you are afraid of other people.

The disciples were very offended: That’s what he tells us before he passes on?! That’s something appropriate for a kid in fifth grade: to fear G-d at least as much as you fear your teacher. But to us, the disciples of the great Rabbi Yochanan Ben-Zakkai?!

Rabbi Yochanan Ben-Zakkai responded to them: “When a man sins, he says, ‘No one should see me.’” When another person is around, we behave as we should: we feel embarrassed to do a lot of things.

Here’s a more practical example: When a man comes to shul with his wife, his conduct is far more dignified than when he comes by himself. Why? Because he knows there is an “eye that sees,” even if there is a partition between the men and women,

he knows well that his wife knows how he's acting—which is why he behaves like a good boy.

Rabbi Yochanan Ben-Zakkai was saying: At least fear G-d as much as you fear your wife. Remember that G-d is also in the room.

G-d's Constant Presence - On the Good Side

But Rabbi Yochanan also gave his disciples a truly great blessing—an important present unlike anything else.

We constantly go around worried: worried about work, worried about kids, worried about health, worried about parents. Jews worry all day. But when a person has this sense that G-d is in his presence, he or she doesn't worry as much. We all believe that G-d watches over us. But only a number of people have this sense that G-d is right there with us, walking at our side and holding our hand, leaving us with nothing at all to worry about.

It's like a person going into an important business meeting feeling very pressured—when he suddenly sees someone he knows and immediately feels more relaxed. All the pressure goes down and he starts smiling. A child whose daddy is right next to him doesn't worry—he knows that someone is protecting him. This feeling is that Rabbi Yochanan wanted to give his disciples—he wanted them to feel that G-d is right there in their lives, in tangible form just like a person in the room.

When you surround yourself with this feeling, your quality of life is sure to completely change—for the better.