
Letter and Spirit of the Law

“Do what is right and good in the sight of the Lord...” (6:18).

This phrase in Deuteronomy 6 catches the eye of generations of Jewish sages who have pondered the Scriptures. The verse appears as an ‘irritation’ in the text; i.e., there is something puzzling about it which calls for deeper reflection and creative interpretation.

They note that it follows numerous exhortations to ‘keep the commandments’ (e.g., see Deuteronomy 4:1,5-9; 5:1,29; 6:1,2,17). Throughout the Torah, and especially in Deuteronomy, one finds constant insistence that every law and statute be faithfully observed by the people of God. Why, then, the addition of this instruction to ‘do what it right and good’? Surely if a person keeps all the commandments, he/she will be living in a way which is ‘right and good’!

For the Jewish sages, the words of the Torah are never superfluous; there must be a further, subtle meaning to be discovered in this verse. Ponder it yourself, in *havrutah*¹, i.e., with a friend... what do you discover there?

Perhaps you considered, as did two great Jewish scholars, Rashi and Maimonides,² that obedience to rules alone is not enough to ensure a just and loving society. More is needed. It is possible to keep the letter of the law but to violate its spirit. Indeed, it is possible to actually negate the depths of God’s desires through foolish use of the letter of the law. As Rashi puts it: *That which is right and good: this implies a compromise...going beyond what the law requires.*

The 20th century Jewish thinker Rabbi Yeshaya Shapira (d.1942) enters the discussion this way:

Whoever wishes to achieve a perfect observance of the Torah cannot rest content with adhering to its explicit rulings. He must

penetrate deeper in order to arrive at the ultimate aim of these rulings. He must not only think of what is good and upright in his own eyes but that ‘which is upright and good in the eyes of the Lord’...

‘You shall do that which is right...’ This special injunction demonstrates that Judaism does not rest content with limiting active evil doing, but also aspires to eradicate potential evil from the soul of man.³

That we should live by the spirit of the law and not just the letter of the law is a familiar teaching to Christians. What is important here is to recognise it also as a fundamental tenet of Judaism. Sadly, in the history of the Church Christians have often stereotyped Judaism as a ‘legalistic’ religion in contrast to Christianity as a religion of ‘love’ and ‘of the spirit’. We can help dispel such stereotypes by becoming acquainted with the interpretative processes at work in Jewish tradition, how the legal passages in Scripture are handled delicately and creatively by Jewish commentators.

We can also reflect on the dangers of legalism and superficial practice in our own lives of faith, and seek to penetrate Christian teachings to discover their deepest sense and meaning for our lives. •

1. *Havrutah* (related to the Hebrew word for ‘friend,’ *haver*) refers to a time-honoured Jewish method of Torah study which requires the active back-and-forth discussion and debate between two or more study-partners.

2. Rashi: Rabbi Shelomo Yitzhaki, 11th c., France.

Maimonides: Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon (also known as Rambam), 12th c., Spain, Egypt.

3. Quoted by Leibowitz, 63.

Sources: Leibowitz, *New Studies in Devarim* (New York, 1996); *Rashi: Commentary on the Torah* (New York: Mesorah, 2001). Scripture: NRSV

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