

The Torah (The Law)

The Law, “A Light for My Path”

The keeper of the *Torah* (the law) has often been accused of being a legalist without soul or intelligence, a disciple of backward religion. On the contrary, the law as it is understood in Israel implies a light that helps one walk and promotes progress. The Psalmist sings of the law as “a lamp that shows me the way and a light that guides me” (Psalm 119:105).

This lesson is contained in the Hebrew word *Torah*, which the ancient Midrash has related to the word *Or*, meaning “light.” It is an allusion to the custom of wearing a light tied to the sandals. The ray thus dispersed shed light on the journey while it also drove serpents away. This image thereby translated the double function of the law: to enlighten, to teach, and therefore help to move forward, but also to protect and ensure the walk. The prophet Isaiah brings up the same association when he says that if people are without the law “there is no light in them” (Isaiah 8:20, NKJV).

Thus, we understand the Jewish resistance to Christian teaching. It is essentially because Christians rejected the law, that the Jewish-Christian separation took place.

It is therefore around the law that Jewish-Christian reconciliation should take place, reminding both camps of the bond between justice and love, and our human need for both grace and the law.

When was the law of God mentioned for the first time?

“The Lord God gave the man a command. He said, ‘You can eat the fruit of any tree that is

in the garden. But you must not eat the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. If you do, you can be sure that you will die” (Genesis 2:16–17; cf. Exodus 20:1–19).*

God’s first words to Adam are expressed as a commandment. The verb *tsawah* (“command”) from which comes the word *mitzwah* (“commandment”) is used in Genesis 2:16. Thus God’s first revelation, first teaching (*torah*), was through a *mitzwah*. (See the word *bar-mitzwah*.) The term “law” or *nomos* (in Greek) with its legalistic connotation is not a correct rendering of the Hebrew word *torah* from the root *yrh* which means “teaching” (Leviticus 10:11). *Torah* and *mitzwah* (commandment) belong together and complement each other, as a rabbi expressed it: “They borrow from each other, as wisdom and understanding—charity and loving kindness—the moon and the stars” (*Exod. R.* 31.15).

How should the law of God be received by men?

“Remove from me the way of lying, And grant me Your law graciously” (Psalm 119:29; cf. Exodus 24:12).

Why should humans keep the law?

As a response to God’s love: “So be careful to follow the commands, rules and laws I’m giving you today” (Deuteronomy 7:11; cf. vs. 8–9).

As a response to God’s grace: “You have seen for yourselves what I did to Egypt. You saw how I carried you on the wings of eagles and brought you to myself. Now obey me completely. Keep my covenant. If you do, then out of all of the

nations you will be my special treasure. The whole earth is mine" (Exodus 19:4–5; cf. Psalm 119:41–45).

As an expression of our love: "I take delight in obeying your commands because I love them. I praise your commands, and I love them. I spend time thinking about your orders" (Psalm 119:47, 48; cf. vs. 69, 72, 97; Deuteronomy 6:3–6).

What is the internal clue in the Ten Commandments which suggests that they are universal and apply to all men and women?

"In six days I made the heavens and the earth. I made the oceans and everything in them. But I rested on the seventh day. So I blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy" (Exodus 20:11).

The Sabbath commandment is justified by the reference to creation. The fourth commandment occupies the center of the Decalogue, like the seal of the ancient covenant documents. Its strategic position suggests that the 10 Commandments are universal, since the God who is there implied is the Creator of the universe, thus the God of everyone.

What other laws point to the same universal scope as the Decalogue?

"Speak to the people of Israel. Tell them, 'Many animals live on land. Here are the only ones you can eat'" (Leviticus 11:2; cf. vs. 3–8; Genesis 1:24–25).

"Many creatures live in the water of the oceans and streams. You can eat all of those that have fins and scales" (Leviticus 11:9; cf. vs. 10–43; Genesis 1:26).

What are the social/civil laws which are not universal and are no longer relevant today?

Slaves: "You must get your male and female slaves from the nations that are around you. You can buy slaves from them" (Leviticus 25:44; cf. Exodus 21:4; Deuteronomy 21:10–12).

Punishment: "If anyone attacks his father or mother, he will be put to death... If anyone calls down a curse on his father or mother, he will be put to death... But if someone is badly hurt, a life must be taken for a life" (Exodus 21:15, 17, 23).

Garment: "The Lord said to Moses, 'Speak to the people of Israel. Say to them, "You must make tassels on the corners of your clothes. A blue cord must be on each tassel. You must do it for all time to come. You will have the tassels to look at. They will remind you to obey all of the Lord's commands. Then you will be faithful to him. You will not go after what your own hearts and eyes long for. You will remember to obey all of my commands. And you will be set apart for your God. I am the Lord your God. I brought you out of Egypt to be your God. I am the Lord your God'" (Numbers 15:37–41; cf. Deuteronomy 22:12).

Mixtures of wool and linen (sha'atnez); Exodus 28:6, 8, 15. *Kil.* 9:1. "Priests wear only wool and linen when they serve in the Temple; also according to Maimonides heathen priests wore such garments" (*Guide* 3:37). This suggests that Biblical laws were to distinguish between priests and non-priests or between Jews and pagans.

Agriculture: "Don't plant two kinds of seeds in your vineyard. If you do, the crops you grow there will be polluted. Your grapes will also be polluted" (Deuteronomy 22:9). Mixing of seeds applies only in Israel (*Kid.* 39a). Reason: Maimonides associated with pagan worship (*Guide* 3.37).

What cultic/ceremonial laws are not universal and are no longer relevant today?

Sacrifices: "Instead, go to the special place he will choose from among all of your tribes. He will put his Name there. That's where you must go. Take your burnt offerings and sacrifices to that place. Bring your special gifts and a tenth of everything you produce. Take with you what you have promised to give. Bring any other offerings you choose to give. And bring the male animals among your livestock that were born first to their mothers" (Deuteronomy 12:5–6). "Make an altar out of dirt for me. Sacrifice your burnt offerings and friendship offerings on it. Sacrifice your sheep, goats and cattle on it. I will come to you and bless you everywhere I cause my name to be honored" (Exodus 20:24). "Sacrifice an animal from your flock or herd. It is the Passover sacrifice in honor of the Lord your God. Sacrifice it at the special place the Lord will choose. He will put his Name there" (Deuteronomy 16:2).

Sacrifices were to be offered only in the Temple.

What clues suggest an essential difference between the Decalogue and the laws dealing with sacrifices?

“Then I came back down the mountain. I put the tablets in the ark I had made, just as the Lord had commanded me. And that’s where they are now” (Deuteronomy 10:5).

“Take this Scroll of the Law. Place it beside the ark of the covenant of the Lord your God” (Deuteronomy 31:26; cf. Exodus 25:16; 1 Kings 8:9).

(a) The Decalogue was written by God (Deuteronomy 10:4) while the sacrificial laws were written by Moses (Deuteronomy 31:9, 24).

(b) The Decalogue was graven on tables of stone—an imperishable material (Deuteronomy 10:3), while the sacrificial laws were written in a book—a perishable material (Deuteronomy 31:24).

(c) The Decalogue was entrusted by God to Moses, who himself placed it *in* the ark (Deuteronomy 10:5), while the sacrificial laws were entrusted by Moses to the priests, who, in turn, placed it *alongside* the ark (Deuteronomy 31:26). That this book was specifically about the sacrifices is confirmed by the fact that King Josiah (2 Chronicles 34:15, 31) found in it the sacrificial instructions (2 Chronicles 35:6, 12) he needed to achieve his reformation.

The Ten Commandments concern everyone beyond time and space; the sacrificial laws are related to the Temple at a specific time.

What kind of laws did the ancient rabbis and the early Christians declare binding for the non-Jews as well as for the Jews?

“Here is what we should write to them. They must not eat food polluted by being offered to statues of gods. They must not commit sexual sins. They must not eat the meat of animals that have been choked to death. And they must not drink blood” (Acts 15:20-21; cf. Genesis 2:16).

“But you must not eat meat that still has blood in it” (Genesis 9:4).

Seven Biblical laws (called Noachic laws by reference to Noah) are considered by rab-

binic tradition as the minimal moral duties for all men: prohibitions of idolatry, blasphemy, bloodshed, sexual sins, theft, consuming blood, etc. (*Sanh.* 56–60; *Yad Melakhim* 8:10; 10:12; *Gen. R.* 34; *Sanh.* 59b). These general principles imply the observance of other laws considered as subheadings of the seven laws: prohibition of idolatry implies the commandment of the Sabbath which implies faith in the Creator; prohibition of blood implies the *Kosher* laws; prohibition of sorcery; injunction to practice charity and honor the *Torah* (*Hul.* 92a; *Sanh.* 57b; *Mid. Ps.* 21). Gentiles who submit themselves to Noachic laws may also freely choose to practice some other laws from the Jewish *Torah* (*Yad. Melakhim* 10:9–10).

Does the experience of “renewal of covenant” (*teshuvah*) encouraged by the Hebrew prophets between God and Israel imply the law has been done away with?

“A new day is coming,’ announces the Lord. ‘I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel” (Jeremiah 31:31; cf. Ezekiel 11:17-20; 36:26–27).

Does the experience of “renewal of covenant” (*teshuvah*) encouraged by the teaching of the New Testament imply the law has been done away with?

“Does faith make the law useless? Not at all! We agree with the law” (Romans 3:31; cf. Matthew 5:17–22, 27–28; Romans 7:6, 22–25; James 1:22–25; 2:10).

A *Talmudic principle*: “Be not like servants who serve the master for the sake of receiving reward; but serve him without the condition of receiving a reward” (*Abot* 1:3).

Why does the experience of “renewal of covenant” imply the observance of the Law?

“So the law is holy. The commandment also is holy and right and good” (Romans 7:12).

“If you love me, you will obey what I command” (John 14:15).

What will characterize God’s people in the “last days” in regard to the Law?

“Remember the law my servant Moses gave you. Remember the rules and laws I gave him at Mount Horeb...I will send you the

prophet Elijah. He will come before the day of the Lord arrives" (Malachi 4:4).

"God's people need to be very patient. They are the ones who obey God's commands. They remain faithful to Jesus" (Revelation 14:12).

How will the nations respond to the Law in Messianic times?

"People from many nations will go there. They will say, 'Come. Let us go up to the Lord's mountain. Let's go to the house of Jacob's God. He will teach us how we should live. Then we will live the way he wants us to.' The law of the Lord will be taught at Zion. His message will go out from Jerusalem" (Isaiah 2:3; cf. 42:1-4; Micah 4:1-2; Revelation 21:24).

"The Torah is not the Torah of the Priests, nor the Torah of the Levites, nor the Torah of the Israelites, but the Torah of Man (*Torath ha-Adam*), whose gates are open to receive the righteous nation which keepeth the truth and those who are good and upright in their hearts" (*Torath Kohanim* 86b).

According to Jewish tradition, the *Torah* was given in the wilderness, an extraterrestrial place and was heard in all the seventy languages so that men of all nations would have a right to it (*Mekh. Yitro* 5; *Shab.* 88b).

"A Gentile who studies the Torah is like the *kohen hagadol*, the high priest" (*Avodah Zarah* 3a).

What is the purpose of the Law?

Freedom: "I will lead a full and happy life, because I've tried to obey your rules" (Psalm 119:45; cf. James 2:8; 1:25).

Lucidity: "So it can't be said that anyone will be made right with God by obeying the law. Not at all! The law makes us more aware of our sin" (Romans 3:20; cf. James 1:23-25; Psalm 119:105; Proverbs 6:23).

"The Laws of the Torah were given that men should live by them, not that they should die by them" (*Avodah Zarah* 27b).

The Law of Liberty

What is the value and the authority of the ancient law of Moses for the modern man, Jewish or Christian?

We do not understand the nature of law in the Bible if we reduce it to a chore which alienates human beings and deprives them of their freedom. This truth is affirmed in the Bible from the start.

The first steps of Adam created from dust and the first steps of the people of Israel liberated from Egypt, are engaged in the rhythm of the law (Genesis 2:4, 16; Exodus 20). In the tradition of Israel, the law is, in fact associated with liberty. Regarding the text of Exodus (32:16) which tells that the law has been "engraved," *haruth*, an old interpretation recommends: "do not read *haruth* (engraved) but *heruth* (liberty)." Through this play on words, the ancient sages related to the law as liberty. The apostle James in the New Testament also echoes this association (James 1:25; 2:12).

Biblical law is thus different than human law. It was determined by God to *serve* human beings and help them find their real identity in order to blossom fully. The law of Israel was conceived in a universal perspective and therefore designed to be always relevant.

A Different Law

Indeed, God did not want to speak His own language. According to the ancient rabbis, the *Torah* although coming from heaven is not *in* heaven. It speaks a human language. It is, therefore, expected that Biblical laws share common points with the laws of Israel's neighbors. The Babylonian Code of Hammurabi of the 18th century (B.C.E.) and the Hittite laws of the 15th century (B.C.E.), to mention only a couple, often deal with the same topics and most of them are written in the same casuistic (case-law) style which characterizes a good number of Biblical laws. For a long time, critical scholars have underlined this connection and deduced from it the dependence of Israel on her cultural environment. However, more recent research in that domain has showed many surprising differences between the two systems of laws.

The first important difference concerns the Biblical emphasis on the value of the human person over objects and society. In Babylon the death penalty is required for some thefts, while the Bible requires only a financial compensation. In Israel human life prevails over material values. Also, in Israelite society, the law is the same for everyone. Contrary to other societies of the ancient Middle East (especially Babylon and Egypt), the Bible does not recognize a privileged class which escapes the rigors of the law.

Biblical laws differ from other laws in that they always refer to God. In Middle Eastern legal documents the reference to God is rare and formal. Biblical laws however, are imbued with this reference to God: “for I am your God.” The law is here understood as the manifestation of the covenant with God (Hosea 8:1). It is the very place of religious life. The law is not perceived as the result of human or social manipulation. The law is instead *received* as a gift, a revelation from above. The law of Israel is thus different from all the others for it implies a dimension that is absent elsewhere: the Jew obeys the law by faith.

A Universal Law

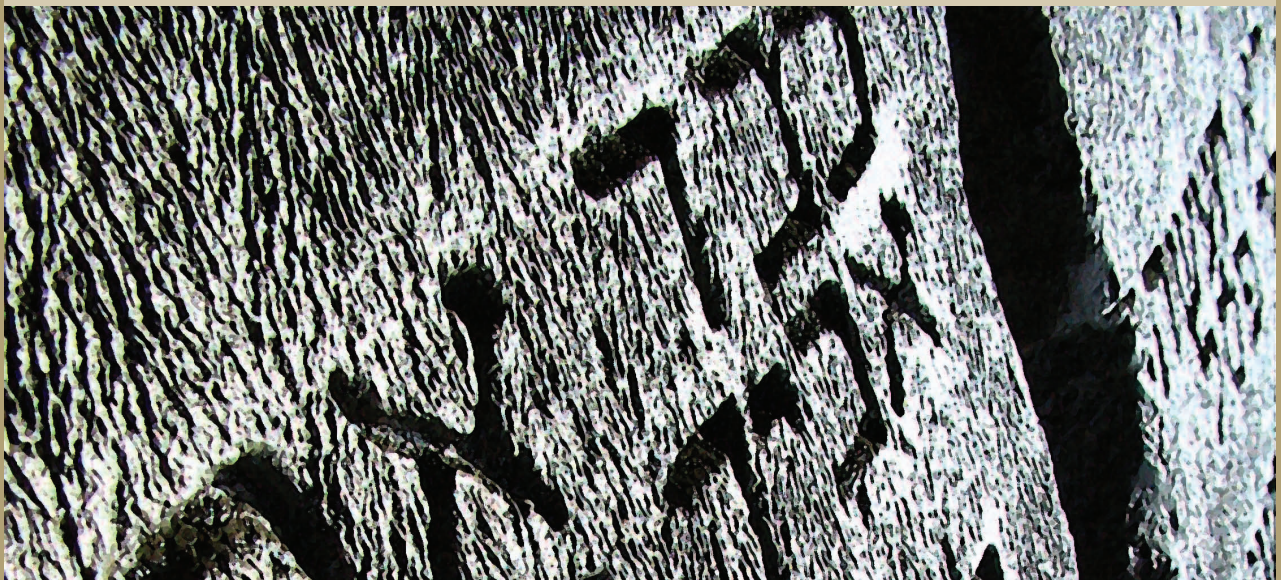
Essentially focusing on the human person and stemming from God, the Biblical law is laden with a universal message. The law concerns *all* men and women, not only Israel. It is true that in Jewish tradition we have two types of laws,

those which apply to the nations (Noachic laws) and those which oblige only the Israelites. Nonetheless, throughout Scripture pervades the hope of one day seeing all people walk and vibrate, as one, under the same law (Malachi 4:1, 2). One of the most eloquent signs of the universal invitation of the law is its reference to creation. It is noteworthy in the Decalogue that the *Shabbat*, memorial of creation, is situated in the geometric and thematic center. That is the very place where the seal was put in ancient covenant documents. The positioning of the *Shabbat* suggests that awareness of God as Creator lies at the very heart of the Ten Commandments.

Likewise, the dietary laws of *kosher* which distinguish between clean and unclean meats are a reminder of Genesis 1. Indeed, the language of Leviticus 11 which records these laws uses the same technical words and stylistic expressions (beasts of the earth, creeping animals, after its kind, etc.). Furthermore, the listing of the animals follows the same sequence as in Genesis 1:24–26 on the sixth day of creation. Likewise in Leviticus 11, the duty to distinguish between clean and unclean meats is associated with the fact that human holiness reflects divine holiness: “you shall be holy; for I am holy” (Leviticus 11:44, 45).

A Law Still Relevant

Because they are related to creation, the religious and moral laws of the Decalogue, as



well as the dietary laws of *Kasheruth*, are universal and therefore still relevant to human beings. The so-called *ceremonial* laws which are related to the temple and the sacrifices, were bound to disappear with it. As for the *circumstantial* laws, they were no longer relevant as soon as the “circumstances” that generated them ceased to exist. This is, for instance, the case for the laws concerning slaves, the way to dress, to till the land and to organize and administer the city. These two last categories of laws (ceremonial and circumstantial) were not designed to be observed forever. On the other hand, the Decalogue and the dietary laws do not belong to the ceremonial laws or the circumstantial laws. These laws have nothing to do with sacrifices. This is obvious in regard to the Decalogue, and it is implied in the laws of clean meats which are given for eating purposes (see for instance, the fish). Also the Decalogue like the *Kasheruth* laws does not belong to the circumstantial laws because these depend on the event of creation, the impact of which is universal and always relevant.

If the universal character of these two series of laws (Decalogue and *Kasheruth*) is intended through their reference to creation, the absence of this reference in other laws does not mean that they are no more normative. In fact, any law that is neither ceremonial nor circumstantial maintains its status as an absolute law. This is the case for the laws of sexuality, of hygiene, relations with neighbors, etc. Most of these laws are an expression of the laws already contained in the Decalogue. Thus, the law of Israel acknowledges two laws, an absolute and universal law, and a relative law which depends on time and circumstance. This distinction is found again in the New Testament, where texts which speak about the abolition of the law are balanced with many other texts that exalt it. Not that these texts contradict each other; they, in fact, speak about two different laws. If the early Christians who were religious Jews were led to cancel the laws of sacrifices because they referred to the Messiah, they never questioned the law of the Decalogue of which Yeshua had even deepened and extended its application. It is the same for the dietary laws of *Kasheruth* which are alluded to in the apostolic recommendations “to not eat the meat of animals that have been choked to death” (Acts 15:20; cf. Leviticus

17:14). From these observations, it follows that the principle of law in religious life remains valid for the Christian as well as for the Jew.

A Law from God

The law is different, universal, and always relevant because it is the very expression of God’s character. It starts there. This is why the Decalogue begins with “I am the Lord your God” (Exodus 20:2). All the commandments find their *raison dé être* there.

According to Rashi, the Ten Commandments were said in one divine word. The lesson thereby taught is that the commandments derive from the same source and are laid on the same principle. The ethical laws “you shall not murder,” etc., are proclaimed in the same breath as the religious laws, “you shall have no other gods before me,” etc. Ancient Jewish tradition even correlates the ethical laws of the second part of the Decalogue to the religious laws of the first part of the Decalogue: “Murder is equivalent to an injury to God. For man is made in the image of God; apostasy is equivalent to adultery; stealing leads to a false oath; the Sabbath breaker is equivalent to the one who covets his neighbor’s wife, etc.”

The law is a gift from God, an expression of His love for mankind, and is therefore designed to be lived as an expression of our love for God. The prophet Jeremiah sees the law written in human hearts (Jeremiah 31:33). The psalmist sings of the love and the delight of the law (Psalms 119:92). Paul himself delights “in the law of God” (Romans 7:22). We should not obey the law out of fear of punishment, or in order to gain favor and salvation from God. We should obey the law freely out of love for God because we are loved and saved by Him (see Exodus 19:4, 5; cf. Psalms 119:41–45). Moreover, we obey the law in order to fulfill our destiny, to be really ourselves. The goal of the law of God is the liberty of men and women.

This is the ideal of the Jew, but also the ideal of any person who wants to live according to God and with Him, for they have understood that they cannot live without Him.

*Unless otherwise noted, all scripture references are taken from the New International Reader’s Version of the Bible, Copyright 1998, by the Zondervan Corporation.