

TANACH TALKS, August 10, 2020

The Law of the Borman Expressway

Summary: Rabbi Michael Stevens led our discussion today with several of his favorite commandments. We responded with several of our own and then focused on the text he provided. Participants generalized from the commandments to fit them to our modern lives. Kindness to strangers became kindness to immigrants, then to anybody in need, whether for sustenance or friendship.

The global commandment to be holy led us to discuss whether “holy” meant separateness or something else. Doug made the down-to-earth observation, that it meant “don’t be a jerk.” When Rabbi Mike added, “Be a mensch,” Doug expanded his conception to include appreciation, awe, and having a sense of wonder. Rabbi Mike explained, “The idea of separateness misses devotion, selflessness.” After a little more discussion of separateness he concluded that “Holiness is a responsibility to neighbors and the world.”

Our discussion of not putting a stumbling block before the blind began with helping them. I mentioned a NY Times article about the inventiveness of the handicapped and how others sometimes tried to solve problems for them that were not problems (e.g., fixing the blind persons’ cane, a favorite tool). Mark added that stumbling blocks can be insults.

The commandment that justice favors neither the rich nor the poor led to diverse ideas. Albert brought up the idea of hostile witnesses (who are unfavorable to those who called them). They present a need for realigning the goal of getting to the truth. Ruth added the distinction of how the theocratic law and the law of kings have been replaced by a more natural law.

The commandment to love your neighbor as yourself first generated discussion about what loving yourself meant. It concluded by observing that the commandment refers not to feelings, but to behavior. Judy explained how helping someone get drugs is not loving them and Marsha added that help means “respecting and esteeming them, their nature, minds, and who they are.”

Rabbi Mike solved the enigma in the commandment not to sow your field with two kinds of seed, by noting how juxtaposed verses often explain each other and the juxtaposed verse is not to plow a field with an ox and an ass at the same time. The weaker one gets an undo burden. Doug generalized this to mean don’t mix your loyalties and Don added that we should respect the difference between different entities.

The discussion of the commandment not to falsify weights and measures led Lynn to observe how important this commandment is today. I elaborated on this with the fascinating Wikipedia article on all the ways “Disinformation” is used.

We did not finish Rabbi Mike’s list but ended with the commandment to correct a wrongdoing affecting another by confessing and adding 20% to the damages. Of course, if one person burns down another’s house, how can anybody fairly calculate 20%?

In conclusion, Rabbi Mike explained how these are all behaviors and we do them not just for ourselves but for society.

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The specifics of the discussion follow:

Rabbi Mike opened our discussion by asking for our favorite commandments. Marty responded with Hillel's commandment: "What is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow: this is the whole Torah; the rest is the explanation; go and learn." We then discussed some of the best-known commandments, where congregants added enriching generalizations.

Exodus 20:13-16 and 22:20. You shall not murder. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. Ex. 22:20. You shall not wrong a stranger or oppress him, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. Judy mentioned how this applies to immigrants. Doug generalized that it tells us to be mindful of our ethical obligations to everyone and Arlene added that a stranger is anybody who is different. For *Ex. 20:22 You shall not ill-treat any widow or orphan*, Barry inferred that this means we should not fail to provide something that people need, like friendship and recognition. Rabbi Mike reminded us that we all have needs.

Leviticus 19:1-2. The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: Speak to the whole Israelite community and say to them: You shall be holy, for I, the Lord your God, am holy. Rabbi Mike explained how that commandment was different from the rest and then asked, "How could God expect us to memorize all of them without a computer." Barry added, "He wrote down the 10 commandments, but we were supposed to memorize the whole Torah." Rabbi Mike explained that of all the 613 commandments, this is considered so inclusive, that it is not even counted among the others. "In the army, we had charges and specifications. This was the charge. The rest tell us what holy means." Barry commented that he looked up the definition of "holy" but didn't like it. The definition said it meant "to be consecrated to a God." He always thought of it as being separate. Rabbi Mike replied that "We have laws that explain to us how to be different, separate.... I don't want you to be like other people." Barry added that God said, "I will separate the sabbath from other days." Doug put it in a down-to-earth perspective. "I think of the word "holy" as referencing everything that is important. When I look at the selection that you have made, I see them all and Leviticus 19:1-2 as being "Don't be a Jerk. The rest of them tell you about the value of the rest." Rabbi Mike put it in Yiddish "the opposite of a jerk is to be a mensch." That made Doug think of other aspects of holiness. He mentioned appreciation, awe, and having a sense of wonder.

Ruth brought us back to the idea of separateness. "Havdalah gives us an idea of separation." Doug replied, "My problem with separateness is whether it's still useful after everyone obeys all the commandments." Rabbi Mike added, "The idea of separateness misses devotion, selflessness."

We did not finish our list, but the last one concerned what to do about

[I missed who said what in the comments that followed, but they are too useful to exclude.] “A holy man sitting in a cave is not holy. I think holy does not imply that you are tribal. These have to do with your relationships with those around you, your neighbors, and community.” Rabbi Mike concluded, “Holiness is a responsibility to neighbors and the world.”

Lev. 19:14. You shall not insult the deaf or place a stumbling block before the blind. Rabbi Mike told the story of a friend who was blind, played piano and trumpet, and could get all around NYC. Lynn added a story about how Art Garfunkel gave himself to a blind friend, helping him navigate the city.

I mentioned an article in the New York Times called “Disabled Do-It-Yourselfers Lead Way to Technology Gains.” It described how innovative handicapped people are and how non-handicapped inventors often try to solve problems that don’t exist, like making a substitute for the blind person’s cane, which is a simple and highly useful device. Mark added that “placing a stumbling block” is more than tripping handicapped people up, it is also an insult to them. Doug added that it is not helpful to tell them they’re stupid. The commandment really means that we should help them. Judy asked if it only applied to someone with a disability, or does it apply to being good all the time.

Lev. 19:15. You shall not render an unfair decision; do not favor the poor or show deference to the rich; judge your neighbor fairly. William thought this one would be good for today’s society. Doug added that justice does not depend on particulars, but is an abstraction outside of all qualifiers. Rabbi Mike recalled a congregation that always put up “generous” of the names of those who gave large donations. He then asked, “How do you quantify how generous a person is?” William recalled a neighbor who gave large donations in the ’40s, He had a speakeasy and his son was a policeman.

Albert wanted to talk about rules. “All we’re talking about is what is fair or not. Are we working with the same rules? In a court, if a witness is not playing by the rules, that party is treated as a hostile witness. At some point, you have to deal with someone who is not playing by the rules. If you are not playing by the rules, you’re not working toward the same rules and I need to change my tack.” Rabbi Mike explained that we need to admonish each other. Albert replied, “We need to get back on the same direction, on the same track.”

Ruth wanted to get back to the judge’s talk (a few days earlier, congregants had enjoyed a talk by Justice Mark Davis on how our current laws depends on the Torah). This is a theocratic contract. This goes all the way back to the Magna Carta, where the king owned everything. Then, the U.S. constitution-makers talked about the “natural” right to self-determine. We don’t have a theocratic contract anymore. William looked at another side of showing deference to the rich, “If a man steals a slice of bread, is he the same as the one who steals the loaf?” Ruth added we now have the natural law of owning our own land (“natural law” is supposed to be independent of, and pre-existent to, the positive law of any given political order, society or nation-state).

Lev. 19:18. Love your neighbor as yourself; I am the Lord. Rabbi Mike explained “If you would like to be treated kindly, treat others kindly. How can we love our neighbor if we don’t feel it in ourselves?” Barry commented that you first have to love yourself. You must be comfortable with

who you are. It's a mental health question. "I am the Lord" What does that mean? The Lord loves himself. I feel that that is the ultimate commandment. Doug added that being holy has to be inside oneself. In response, Barry told the story "I have a brother in law who will give you the shirt off his back. He doesn't like himself. You have to be comfortable with who you are and what you believe before you can transfer it to anyone else."

Rabbi Mike raised a related question, "We find v'ahavta, to love God, as a song in a key part of our service. Is the commandment about feelings or something else?" Barry answered, "Along the same line, I was having a hard time when my father died. The commandment was honor your father, not love him." I offered that honor means to preserve and protect. Rabbi Mike added that is not about feelings, it's about behavior. Judy commented, "What if loving yourself means taking drugs, that is not loving." Marsha added that "loving themselves means self-respect and self-esteem. Then you can give those to others—respecting and esteeming them, nature, mind, who you are."

Lev. 19:19. You shall not sow your field with two different kinds of seed; you shall not put on cloth from a mixture of two different kinds of material. Annette asked "I don't understand what purpose this commandment has. What does that mean?" William offered that if you have a field, two different kinds of seeds take different materials out of the field. Pineapple takes an abundance of magnesium. If you try to grow it in other countries it will destroy other crops."

Deut. 22:9. You shall not sow your vineyard with a second kind of seed, else the crop from the seed you have sown—and the yield of the vineyard may not be used. Deut. 22:10. You shall not plow with an ox and a donkey together. Rabbi Mike explained that when two verses are placed together, it is for a purpose. William observed the oxen and the donkey have different capabilities. Doug generalized with don't mix your loyalties. Don added that we should respect the difference between different entities. Each should be respected. Rabbi Mike explained if we keep the animal the same, everyone shares the load. Otherwise, the weaker animal gets an unfair share of the burden.

Lev. 19:35-36. You shall not falsify measures of length, weight, or capacity. You shall have an honest balance, honest weight, honest ephah, and honest hin. Rabbi Mike asked "How can we say this positively? Doug answered that trade only works if people have honest measures. William added that in the U.S. there is a bureau of standards. Measure up to that, he added, "I still have a set of weights that I had in college." Lynn got us back to Rabbi Mike's question with her comment "that it's very relevant at this time." I expanded telling people about the Wikipedia article on "disinformation," which goes on for page after page of different types of disinformation and gives very little information about remedies.

Numbers 5:5-7. When a man or woman commits any kind of wrong toward a fellow man, thus breaking faith with the Lord, and that person realizes his guilt, he shall confess the wrong that he has done. He shall make restitution in the principal amount and add one-fifth of it. Rabbi Mike asked how we would understand this. I responded through restitution for slavery and restitution for greed. Rabbi Mike commented, "If you steal a TV set, you should admit it and pay 20% and asked "If a person burns down a house, how does he pay for restitution when the value

of the house is different for one person than another?” You can take the numbers too far. The purpose of this commandment is to tell people in advance to do the right thing.

By way of conclusion, Rabbi Mike asked us what do all these laws have in common, besides being ethical, and with the Borman expressway” Lynn answered, “They tell us how to be a good person. Mary added, “The tell us how to act like good human beings.” Doug observed that they’re all different angles on the golden rule.

Rabbi Mike explained “We’re doing this for society, not just for ourselves. Why do we need all these laws? He answered his own question. The Borman Expressway is 16 miles where two highways coincide. Throughout the entire 16 miles there are different speed limit signs for driving 55, if everyone obeyed them, would we still need them? Same for the commandments, if people obeyed them, would we still need them? Mark answered, “This doesn’t tell you how you can avoid doing wrong, it tells you how we can live with each other.”

Rabbi Mike concluded with one of his favorite stories. “We can’t always be trusted to do the right thing. Fifty years ago on the Southern State Parkway, along Long Island, the speed limit said 55, but everyone was driving 65. Even though he was in the middle of cars riding in the right lane all traveling 65, my brother got a speeding ticket. On his way home, he drove in the right-hand lane again but this time at 55. Then, he was given a ticket for impeding the flow of traffic.”

David Dirlam with edits by Rabbi Mike

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*Office@bethshalomnc.org
ddirlam@changingwisdoms.com
rabbi@bethshalomnc.org
michael.stevens@prodigy.net*