

## Torah Thoughts Mishpatim

5779:

Much of rabbinic literature is simply legal writing by another name. Over two thousand years of Jewish history, much of our communal life has been shaped by a legal approach to life.

Wherever Jews lived, we usually had a great deal of autonomy to run our own affairs, according to biblical and rabbinic law and tradition. Every aspect of life has a deep well of textual sources from which we can draw spiritual and intellectual sustenance.

For instance, there is a passage in this week's Torah portion that is well-known among students of the Talmud. It stipulates the punishments for cases where 1) an ox gores a person to death; 2) an ox gores a slave; 3) a goring ox is known to be dangerous and its owner forewarned to take control of it. If you are thinking that such matters have little or no relation to our times, just substitute the words 'Chevy' or 'pit bull' into the appropriate case and it becomes instantly relevant.

One of the most important legal presumptions in Jewish law is based on this passage. The early rabbis of the Mishnah ruled, based on the case of the habitually goring ox, that negligence on the part of an owner of such an animal (or Chevy with faulty brakes) creates culpability for any damages that such an animal causes. If we know we have a dangerous animal on our hands, and it then harms someone or otherwise causes damage, we are legally responsible to make restitution.

This is one small illustration of the kind of legalism that pervades the Jewish experience. It shows that Judaism does not espouse a dry, theoretical expression of our faith, but rather a sacred tradition that has something to say about the most common and even mundane issues of life. Judaism integrates our spiritual, intellectual, commercial and legal needs into a complex culture. From a Jewish point of view, every one of those elements is, by definition, religious, because each one is informed by the will of God. Put another way, as Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel once did: Religion is not a separate aspect of life; it is the one aspect that gives depth to all the others.

Shabbat shalom