

# A Constitution

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The Ten Commandments we read last week, were general statements of principles. After they were given they needed to be translated into effective tools of legislation. It is like the American Constitution. The initial declarations of the Founding Fathers needed to be expanded into constitution. Then the constitution needed amendments to the Constitution. Even so each generation goes on interpreting the constitution through the decisions of the Supreme Court.

Any legal system must be constantly expanded, developed and modified. This is what this week's reading from the Torah does. It turns the principles into a fully effective system of governance that covers every aspect of society. We are given a fascinating list of rules and regulations, almost all of which we would call civil law.

Being a good person is crucial of course and the priority. Having a ritual way of life is important too. One needs ideals, grand principles. But one also needs a legal system to regulate human behavior and disputes. The question of property rights, of damages, of responsibilities towards others, employment and charity, are all expanded. In ancient times there was no distinction as we now have between State and Religion. Religious law covered everything.

Earlier codes of Law like Hammurabi's, written in Mesopotamia about three thousand eight hundred years ago were similar in that they covered every aspect of life. So did the Egyptian codes. But what is remarkable about the Torah is the way all 'citizens' are treated equally before the law. In Hammurabi, if a male aristocrat killed a woman or a slave he was not punished in the same way, it was not regarded as being as serious. In Jewish Law despite there being ritual differences, when it came to damages and rights everyone was equal. Every human life as valuable. This is a remarkable feature that would differentiate the Torah from any other system for thousands of years.