

Consequences

This week's reading continues the recapitulation of the biblical laws first given in Exodus. But whereas last week's dealt mainly with government and social affairs, this week we deal mainly with personal morality. How the individual should behave, rather than the State.

The transition is marked by the law of the captive woman. If a man goes to war and sees a woman he wants, he may take her as a wife. It does not say he rapes her first. But he takes her home and she has to go through a month's mourning for her parents and her past in which she must not look her best. Then if the man still wants to marry her he may. Then if he no longer desires her, he may not treat her like a slave or sell her because, says the Torah he has given her a difficult time. The Hebrew ambiguously uses a word that can also mean rape. Having raped her, the Torah might be saying, he must respect her and cannot abuse her further. Interestingly later in this parsha, the Torah compares rape to murder. But here conditions of war have allowed an exception. However, the rabbis insist the Torah was making an exception as a concession to extraordinary circumstances.

The Torah goes on to consider a man with two wives, one he loves and one he hates. Here too the rabbis look for a moral. Where one chooses wife out of lust, the marriage is unlikely to be a good or happy one. From there the Torah deals with a rebellious son who is out of control. The Talmud says such a case never happened and was intended only as a warning to parents to ensure they do not drive a child away through neglect or bad parenting. Here too they conclude that a child of an unwanted or unloved mother is unlikely to grow up unscarred by the experience. One thing leads to another and another to another and so on.

The underlying themes are that there are consequences! If you marry for the wrong reason you produce unhappy families. Unhappy families produce unhappy kids. People who are badly brought up are more likely to commit crimes. And the Torah goes in to list the sorts of crimes it feels strongly about. Treating parents, women, workers, the poor and animals cruelly, violently or harshly.

Some people are givers, charitable, caring for the welfare of others. But some are takers, only seeking gratification for themselves. When it says in Exodus that "the bad actions of fathers are visited onto the next generation" it doesn't mean punishment. But it does mean that there are consequences. And yet I know so many cases where the sons behave so much better than their fathers. We have the freedom to make better choices.