

**HAPPY MULES**  
**A Devotional Meditation from**  
**Deuteronomy 22:10; Luke 5:36-39; 2 Corinthians 6:14-18**  
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One of the TV shows I remember as a child was *Death Valley Days*, an anthology series featuring stories from the American West, especially Death Valley, California. I don't remember much about the stories, but I do remember the spectacular imagery of the opening and closing sequences. The sponsor of the TV show, and the long-running radio show before that, was the Pacific Coast Borax Company, maker of 20 Mule Team Borax. As the company will gladly tell you, their product is more than simply laundry soap, having many uses around the home.



*20 mule Borax team, Mojave, California Valley line, ca. 1880. Photo shows teams of 18 mules and two horses attached to large wagons in the desert; two pale horses, positioned closest to the wagon, wear coverings over faces. [Albertype Co., Copyright Claimant, Library of Congress #2013647267.](#)*

But in my child's mind, the properties of Borax had little application. What mattered to me was the picture of massive wagons pulled by a team of 20 mules harnessed together. That was how borax was transported from mines in the California desert long ago in the days of the Old West. Or such is the popular understanding. In actual practice, the teams consisted of 18 mules and two horses. The horses were harnessed closest to the wagons so that their size and brute strength could aid in getting the assembly started. The mules, being better suited to desert conditions, provided stability and endurance for the long journey of 165 miles from the mines to the railhead.

This image of the 20-mule team came to mind as I pondered one of those peculiar commandments in the Torah:

You are not to plow with an ox and a donkey together. (Deuteronomy 22:10 TLV)

Why would the Creator prohibit the pairing of these two different types of animals? Does it apply only to oxen and donkeys, or any two different species of animal harnessed together? And is it only applicable to ancient times and situations involving draft animals, or are there wider implications?

I have learned in pondering such things that there is value in consulting Jewish sources. After all, Jewish scholars have consulted, prayed through, and debated over the Torah for millennia, and having done so in the original Hebrew, their understanding is more complete than my own. A brief survey of Jewish commentary on this verse confirmed my immediate conclusion and provided even more insight.

The consensus among the sages and rabbis is that this commandment does apply to any situation regarding the yoking of two different types of animals to perform any task, whether plowing or hauling burdens.

The sages point to the fact that the ox is a clean animal, acceptable as an offering on the Lord's altar in the Temple, but the donkey is unclean. The commandment therefore addresses the mixture of clean and unclean, holy and profane. God does not like mixture, and certainly does not want that which He has designated as holy to be defiled by the common or profane things of this world. It seems the Apostle Paul accepted this interpretation when he applied this principle in his second letter to the Corinthians:

Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers. For what partnership is there between righteousness and lawlessness? Or what fellowship does light have with darkness? What harmony does Messiah have with Belial? Or what part does a believer have in common with an unbeliever? What agreement does God's Temple have with idols? For we are the temple of the living God—just as God said,

“I will dwell in them and walk among them; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people.

Therefore, come out from among them, and be separate, says *ADONAI*.

Touch no unclean thing. Then I will take you in.

I will be a father to you, and you shall be My sons and daughters, says *ADONAI-Tzva'ot*.” (2 Corinthians 6:14-18 TLV)

Paul's exhortation is in the context of laboring together as ambassadors of our Heavenly King. That is why it is best for disciples of our Messiah to cultivate relationships within the family when at all possible. The obvious example is in marriage, but it also extends to business and other professional relationships. Why not strengthen the economy of the Kingdom by buying and selling among the community of faith?

Of course, there is the danger of applying this rule so zealously that we cut ourselves off from parts of the community because of standards we have added from our own interpretation of correct beliefs and practice. This leads to a “ghetto mentality” in which only our own particular denomination, congregation, or fellowship are worthy of trust. I'm not sure that's what our Father intends, which is why I was glad to see another aspect to interpretation of the commandment. Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks explains it this way:

Another law is: "Do not plough with an ox and donkey together" (Deut. 22:10). The ox is stronger than a donkey, so expecting the donkey to match the work of an ox is cruel. Each animal species has its unique role in the scheme of creation that we must respect.\*

Rabbi Sacks addresses the fact that our Creator has compassion for all living things, and He does not want any creature to suffer needlessly. In this case, an ox and a donkey may each be used for plowing, but their strengths and abilities are different. The ox plows best because it is the strongest, but the donkey is hardier and more intelligent, so it can be used in many different ways. Yoking a donkey with an ox only leads to frustration for both animals and for their master, making the task much more difficult to complete – if it is even possible. A kind, skilled master knows which animal is best for each task, and will organize his or her labor accordingly.

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\* Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, “Animal Welfare: Ki Tetzei (Deuteronomy 21:10-25:19),” Aish.com (<https://www.aish.com/tp/i/sacks/559748591.html>).

This does have application to us humans, as I learned in the Army. Light infantry and heavy tanks are both suitable for offensive operations, and each can support the other, but do not have them attack along the same axis at the same time. The armor will move much faster than the infantry, and will overcome heavy defenses much more easily. However, when it comes to consolidating the defense of a newly won piece of terrain, the infantry is better suited. Soldiers on the ground are more able than soldiers in tanks to see and adapt to an enemy threat.

It seems that this principle applies to all human activities, including the work of the Kingdom of Heaven. I think that is what Messiah Yeshua meant when He said:

“No one tears a piece of cloth from a new garment and puts it on an old garment; otherwise he will both tear the new, and the piece from the new will not match the old. And no one puts new wine into old wineskins; otherwise the new wine will burst the skins and it will be spilled out, and the skins will be ruined. But new wine must be put into fresh wineskins. And no one, after drinking old *wine* wishes for new; for he says, ‘The old is good *enough*.’” (Luke 5:36-39 TLV)

The Kingdom is more diverse than we may imagine. It could be described as a tapestry woven by our Master, using different bits of seemingly incompatible thread to create a stunningly beautiful picture. In practical terms, that means He uses the hierarchy of the Catholic Church, the emphasis on scripture of the Reformed churches, the priesthood of the believer upheld by Congregational churches, the gifts of the Spirit in the Pentecostal churches, and the understanding of His Torah and times and seasons within the Messianic and Hebrew Roots congregations. The compassionate works of ministries to orphans, widows, the sick and imprisoned, the downcast and enslaved and hurting are all indispensable pieces of this picture. So, too, are the deep understandings of scripture from the Jewish yeshivas.

Are we all involved in bringing this Kingdom into our present reality? Yes.

Are we all laboring under the same yoke at the same task? No.

The diversity is so great, the tasks so specialized, that our Master is the only One Who can comprehend and direct the effort. The best we can do is simply fulfill our own roles, and not interfere with others as they fulfill theirs.