

DO NOT CLIMB ON THE LION

A Devotional Meditation on Ki Tetze (When You Go Out)

Deuteronomy 21:10-25:19; Isaiah 54:1-10; Matthew 7:12, 20:25-28

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August 26, 2023

Do you ever think about the stories behind funny signs? Whether the humor is intentional or accidental, it gets our attention and communicates something important that we might not otherwise consider. When we see a sign in a store saying, “Unattended children will be given an espresso and a free puppy,” we understand that the shop owners have had to navigate unpleasant situations involving unruly children. A sign next to a display of wax fruit that says, “Do not eat,” tells us that someone tried to do just that. Then there’s this warning:

For Your Own Safety

Please Do Not Climb

On The Lion

I don’t know the story behind that sign. It probably refers to a lion statute, but it’s within the realm of possibility that a visitor to a wild animal park had tried to ride a lion, with predictably unfortunate results.



Photo by Stewart Black, Bath, England, July 21, 2010, [via Flickr](#).

Unfortunate is too mild a word for the stories behind some of these signs. They seem humorous, but the prospect of a lost child wandering through a shop and choking on a bite of wax fruit borders on the tragic. The tragedy is very real when someone is killed after falling into a wild animal enclosure. It’s not just the human suffering and loss of life, but the fact that the terrible events could have been prevented simply by following the rules.

“Rules” can mean everything from informal standards of conduct to legal statutes enacted by governments. Rules are usually established because someone did something offensive or dangerous. Whether they are tax laws, school dress codes, or safety regulations, rules are designed to protect us from our tendency to harm ourselves by having our own way at the expense of others.

Those who contend that rules, laws, and policies are the stuff of tyrannical oppression have a point. It’s not just individuals who want to have their own way at the expense of others. Corporations, governments, and other organizations, being created and operated by humans, have that same tendency. That’s why Messiah Yeshua issued this exhortation to His disciples:

But *Yeshua* called them over and said, “You know that the rulers of the nations lord it over them, and their great ones play the tyrant over them. It shall not be this way among you. But whoever wants to be great among you shall be your servant,

and whoever wants to be first among you shall be your slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many.”

Matthew 20:25-28 TLV

Does Yeshua want us to be compliant sheep, taking whatever abuse is dished out from narcissistic authority figures? Perhaps that is necessary in some people’s stories, and perhaps in other’s stories it is necessary to stand between the sheep and the abusers – whether they are wolves identified as such, or wolves masquerading as sheep. We learn the difference when we serve others, and as servants learn what we appreciate in a leader. If we carry our Messiah’s instruction to the logical conclusion, we realize that what we appreciate most are servant-leaders who guard our dignity because they recognize the intrinsic value our Creator bestowed on all human beings. That value is evident in the Creator’s instructions to His Covenant Nation of Israel about how to treat each other:

You are not to oppress a hired servant who is poor and needy, whether he is from your brothers or the outsiders in your land within your town gates. On that day you are to give him his wages—the sun is not to set on it—for he is poor and sets his heart on it. Otherwise he will cry out against you to *ADONAI*, and you will have sin on you.

Fathers are not to be put to death for children, and children are not to be put to death for fathers—each one is to be put to death for his own sin. You are not to twist justice for an outsider or orphan, and you are not to take as collateral a widow’s clothing. But you are to remember that you were a slave in Egypt, and *ADONAI* your God redeemed you from there. Therefore I am commanding you to do this thing.

When you reap your harvest in your field and have forgotten a sheaf in the field, you are not to turn back to get it. It is for the outsider, for the orphan and for the widow—in order that *ADONAI* your God may bless you in all the work of your hands. When you beat your olive tree, you are not to search through the branches afterward. It is for the outsider, for the orphan and for the widow. When you harvest your vineyard, you are not to pick over it afterward. It is for the outsider, for the orphan and for the widow. You are to remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt. Therefore I am commanding you to do this thing.

Deuteronomy 24:14-21 TLV

There’s good reason God twice says that the Hebrews must remember they were slaves in Egypt. As soon as they forget that truth, they begin to be transformed into Egyptians and start trying to change their reality to their own liking. Figuratively speaking, we might say that such a person seeks to climb on the lion and become ruler over his or her environment. That becomes a problem when they encounter others who also want to shape reality according to their preferences. The resulting battle of wills usually ends up with one person dominating the other by force or manipulation. The winners get the lion’s share, while the losers lick their wounds and look for a way to find what they call justice, but what is actually revenge. This is how the cycle of violence and oppression continues to this day, and why it will continue indefinitely until we take to heart another bit of Yeshua’s counsel:

So in all things, do to others what you would want them to do to you—for this is the *Torah* and the Prophets.

Matthew 7:12 TLV

That should be what we call “common sense,” but it isn’t. We appreciate the idea of doing to others as we would want them to do to us, but it gets hard when doing to others means changing a dirty diaper when mom is sick, or working a double shift when a coworker asks for time off to attend a family event, or paying attention to a socially awkward youth instead of walking away because they are just too weird. It’s in these small things that we cultivate the habits our Messiah desires. Those habits have their roots in the revelation that every human being has value in our Creator’s eyes – even the socially awkward, mentally challenged, poor, dirty, young, elderly, disabled, alien, and confused. He wants to redeem and transform us all, both as individuals and as entire societies.

It’s a learning process, which is why the Torah given so many thousands of years ago sometimes seems incomprehensible to us. The community of nations into which Israel was born had a different regard for human life than we do today, or so we suppose. The community of nations we dwell among has its own share of barbarities and abominations which a decent person from Egypt or Mesopotamia might find reprehensible. And yet, the Torah, or Law, God gave through Moses is the standard Yeshua wants us to study so we know how we want to be treated, and therefore how to treat others. Instead of getting bogged down in objections to individual provisions of the Torah, we look for the principles behind those provisions and how they guide human society toward an ideal of upholding the dignity of every man, woman, and child. If we disregard those principles, then we will try to climb on the most convenient lion and dominate others. If we take God’s principles to heart, then we walk in the shadow of the Lion of Judah to serve others in His Name.