

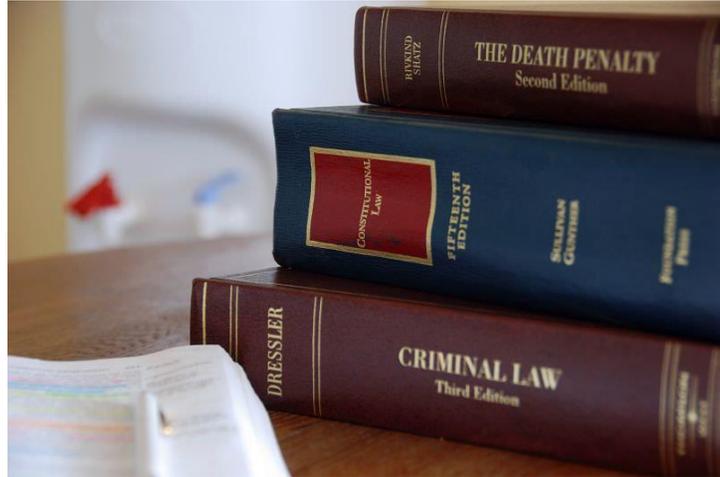
A MATTER OF PRINCIPLE

A Devotional Meditation on Mishpatim (Ordinances)

Exodus 21:1-24:18; Jeremiah 33:25-26, 34:8-22
Hosea 8:12; Matthew 5:17-20; Galatians 3:23-29

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My father's law books have been gathering dust for nearly 70 years, first in his basement, and now in my garage. From time to time, I wonder whether I should dispose of them. They are of little value now, but they were indispensable when he was in law school, and buying them stretched the family's budget to the limit. The irony is that my father never became a lawyer. He finished law school, but never took the bar exam. He said he earned his law degree to help him in his career as an insurance professional.



Law books. Photo by Paige, February 22, 2008, [via Flickr](#).

Like my father, I never earned the credentials one would have expected from my chosen educational path. I had intended to earn a doctoral degree in history, but never finished it. One reason was that I had had enough with campus politics and an academic elite whose world view differed greatly from my own. Another reason was that I was hired by the Federal Government before I finished my degree. I thought I needed the PhD to be a worthy candidate, but my professional and academic experience provided all the credentials I needed. Then there was the new reality brought on by the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. When the world changed, so did my priorities and career goals. Soon I was back in the Army, and any thought of completing the doctorate left my mind.

That doesn't mean that all knowledge of history left my mind. Neither did the principles of historical research leave me, nor the discipline to dig out further knowledge and apply it to what I had already acquired. In the same way, the legal knowledge my father acquired served him well throughout his career. In time, that knowledge blossomed into skills, expertise, and connections that enabled him to go into business for himself.

My father's legal training and my historical training guided us not only to our professional callings, but to the world view that shaped our lives and the lives of our families. That reminds me of what Paul said about the Torah, or Law, as it is often called:

Now before faith came, we were being guarded under *Torah*—bound together until the coming faith would be revealed. Therefore the *Torah* became our guardian to lead us to Messiah, so that we might be made right based on trusting. But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian. For you are all sons of God through trusting in Messiah *Yeshua*. For all of you who were immersed in Messiah have clothed yourselves with Messiah. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is

neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female—for you are all one in Messiah *Yeshua*. And if you belong to Messiah, then you are Abraham’s seed—heirs according to the promise.

Galatians 3:23-29 TLV

There is an argument that this passage proves Christians no longer need to pay any attention to the Torah because Messiah established something new and better. The problem with that argument is that Messiah never established a new standard of righteousness, but instead was careful to uphold the teachings of Moses and the Prophets. That’s hard to understand, though, when we actually read the Torah and get bogged down in all the details of God’s Law. It’s one thing to obey the Ten Commandments, which cover practical things like honoring our parents, telling the truth, respecting other people’s property and relationships, and maintaining proper sexual conduct. We can also understand the commandments about having only one God, honoring His Name, and worshipping Him in the way He likes at the time He specifies. All those things are, or should be, second nature to the committed follower of *Yeshua*. Ordering our lives by these commandments sets us apart from the people around us who don’t honor God’s standards of righteousness. That’s what it means to be light shining in the darkness.

But what about all those other laws that seem outdated in this postmodern world? We can start with the verses immediately after the Ten Commandments. The first thing Moses records is a series of regulations on slavery, which begin this way:

Now these are the ordinances which you will set before them. If you buy a Hebrew servant, he is to serve for six years, and in the seventh he is to go free, without payment. If he comes in by himself, he is to go out by himself. If he was married, then his wife will go out with him. If his master gave him a wife, and she bears him sons or daughters, the wife and her children will be her master’s, and he will go free by himself.

Exodus 21:1-4 TLV

Moses goes on to write about how to treat slaves, which immediately causes us to question why this is in the Torah, and how it could possibly apply to us. Then he writes about assault, theft, domestic violence, and mandatory worship festivals. We read this and think how burdensome it must be to try to follow all that law, and how terrible it must be for the Jews who still believe they have to do exactly that.

If that’s as far as we go, then we miss much of God’s counsel, just as Hosea prophesied:

Though I were to write out for him ten thousand things from My *Torah*, they are regarded as something strange.

Hosea 8:12 TLV

That’s why we have to study the entire Word of God so that it ceases to be strange, and becomes the guide for our lives. As Paul says, the Torah cannot bring us salvation, and was never intended to do so, but it can point us to the One Who saves and teach us how we are to conduct ourselves as His people. As we study, we realize that our lives fall

short of His standard of righteousness, and that we need His intervention to become the people He intended all along.

That, by the way, is something on which Christians and Jews agree. It's the reason Paul includes a message about Israelite, or Hebrew, identity in his letter to the Jewish and non-Jewish believers among the Galatians. Messiah brings us all into covenant relationship with God and with each other as the seed, or descendants of Abraham. That's the goal: not the elimination of Torah, but the addition of people from every tribe and tongue and nation to the people God is saving and teaching to live by His statutes.

But what about those archaic and offensive parts of Torah, such as regulating slavery? This is where my historical training and my father's legal training can help. Instead of getting wrapped up in the specifics, look for the governing principles behind them. That's how we move beyond the letter of the law and arrive at the spirit. In a world where a privileged elite possessed most of the wealth and held power over the vast majority of the population, God had to present instructions that moved His people away from an abusive patron-client society to a society of equals who treat one another with honor and respect.

We still haven't arrived at such a society, and until we do, we still need laws to regulate our hard-hearted behavior. As it was 3,000 years ago, it's still better to rely on God's Law and appeal to Him on the principle of it, than to rely on man's laws that sometimes have no principle at all.