

DARSHANUT

Darshanut, *derived from the Hebrew root darash [explicate, expound], presents the expository, homiletic interpretation of the Bible. Its origins are as old as the most ancient aggadic and midrashic teachings and as new as the sermon or D'var Torah delivered on the most recent Shabbat. The intent is a challenge to relate the Bible to the problems, issues and goals of daily living.*

We encourage our readers to contribute to Darshanut. The submission should be based on the Bible, no more than 750 words in length, and as relevant and current as you would like to make it. For more information on submissions, see the inside back cover.

THE SEVEN MITZVOT OF B'NAI NOAH: VARIETIES OF THEFT

THEODORE STEINBERG

One of the major topics in the *parshah* of Noah (Gen. 6:9 - 11:32) is the *Sheva Mitzvot B'nai Noah*, the seven commandments that the Almighty established with Noah and his descendants after the Flood. This came to be understood in Jewish tradition as God's *brit* [covenant] with the whole of humanity. Whoever chooses to live under these seven laws is among God's chosen ones.

This covenant is based on the verses in Genesis 9:1-17. Rabbinic tradition offers more than one version of it. The main one is in the midrash Genesis Rabbah 34:8: The sons of Noah were given seven commandments: six acts forbidden and one required. Those forbidden are idolatry, incest (or more generally, unchastity), the shedding of blood (murder), profaning God's Name, robbery, and cutting off flesh or a limb from a living animal. The positive commandment is the summons to maintain a system of justice in society.

Each of these categories received meticulous treatment in rabbinic tradition. The paragraphs which follow will focus on just one: *gezeilah* [robbery].

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According to Rav Yehudah (Bava Batra 165), *rov ba'gezel* – most people occasionally are guilty of some sort of thievery. When we think of *gezel* such examples as armed robbery, burglary, car theft, and corporate conniving may come to mind. The sages would have agreed, but they seemed to be mindful of something else: A kind of thievery that tends to come without premeditation; little ways in which, unaware and unintentionally, we may deprive others of their due profit or their legitimate needs and rights.

Here are a few examples that appeared in a copy of the publication *Hadaf Hayomi*. A famous rabbi known as the Hafetz Haim was very concerned about the quality of some books he had had printed. He was worried that there might be smudged or defective pages in a copy that people would buy. Thus, they would pay good money and receive damaged goods. He ordered the printer to reprint any damaged pages and advertise that these were available to anyone who had bought a defective copy.

He also worried greatly about minor errors; misspelled words, a missed comma, and the like. He hired special proofreaders to go over every page, and if approved, the first page would be marked, "proofread." Other book-writing rabbis were similarly concerned, feeling that selling a book with a minor mistake in it might be a form of thievery. Some of them had printed on the front page: "Dear Purchaser – This book is not proofread and I assume no responsibility." (Perhaps they also lowered the price.)

This kind of sensitivity extended beyond books. In the Talmud, Berachot 6b, R. Chelbo said: "Whoever knows that his friend is accustomed to say Hello, should anticipate him and try to say Shalom first. And if the other greets you, and you fail to return the greeting, such a person is called a *gazlan*, a thief. He has stolen the other's good will."

And R. Chelbo in the name of R. Huna, goes further: Whoever is invited to a wedding feast and fails to add his own contribution to the bridegroom's joy, may sin against the five *kolot*, the "voices" that are mentioned in the marriage ceremony. The voice of joy and the voice of gladness, the voice of the bride and the groom rejoicing, and the voice of young people feasting and singing.

If one does not help the bridegroom to rejoice, it's a kind of thievery, for you have robbed the groom of the joy due him.

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And one final example: A famous rabbi was standing at the door to the synagogue and reciting the silent meditation. Another equally well-known rabbi tiptoed over to him and whispered: "*Gazlan*-robber. The synagogue is packed full, and you are standing here and robbing the congregation of fresh and cool air."

It was this kind of moral sensitivity to the smallest things – as well as the big ones – that earned these rabbis and sages the status of saintliness.

They treated the other six commandments of the covenant of B'nai Noah in much the same way because they believed that the hurts and social ailments of the world could be cured if humanity would accept, at the very least, the B'nai Noah covenant as its guide to living.

RESPONSES from Rabbi Hayyim Halpern's book **TORAH DIALOGUES**

1. Our Sages (Sanhedrin 56b) derived seven universal commandments from various verses in Genesis.
 - a. The establishment of a system of justice (18:19).
 - b. Prohibition of blasphemy (2:16).
 - c. Prohibition of idolatry (2:16).
 - d. Prohibition of incest (2:16).
 - e. Prohibition of murder (9:6).
 - f. Prohibition of robbery (2:16).
 - g. Prohibition of eating part of a live animal (9:4).

2. The element is iron. Its absence from the Tabernacle indicates a pre-Iron Age era (ca. 1100 B.C.E.). This helps to date the wilderness period. The intent of avoiding iron may also be to shun instruments associated with war and murder (cf. Num. 35:16; I Kgs. 6:7).