

**Parashah One Hundred and Thirty–Nine**  
Deuteronomy 17:1–20; 1Samuel 8:1–9; Acts 13:21–23

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*notes by Tim Hegg*

*Keeping the First Commandment*

The first word of the Ten Words is: “I am Adonai your God Who brought you out of the land of Egypt.” This opening of the Ten Words is a summary of the whole, for it establishes the relationship between Israel and God, and shows that this relationship came about by the act of His having chosen her and redeemed her out of Egypt. It is fitting, then, that the second of the Ten Words prohibits the worship of any other god, or the use of idols in worship.

Idolatry, in all of its modes, is absolutely and completely devastating to the establishment of the covenant God has forged with His people. This is so because all worship, whether genuine or false, affects all aspects of life: legal, religious, economic, social, and civil. God reveals to us in the opening word of the Ten that if Israel were to engage in idolatry, it would bring about her ruin and cause her to fail in accomplishing the mission for which she was created.

In our portion this Shabbat we have specific instruction based, in a most foundational way, upon the first words of the Decalogue. Here, with the setting of the theocratic rule of Adonai in view, we have the statutes regarding what is to be done when idol worship is discovered. From these instructions we may glean timeless principles for our own worship, and gain a glimpse into the character and attributes of God Himself.

The *parashah* opens with a prohibition against bringing a defective animal as a sacrifice to God. Such a practice is “abhorrent” to the Lord. The word translated by JPS as “abhorrent” (NASB, “detestable”) is תועבה, *to'avah*, and is used in regard to homosexuality (Lev 18:22); eating meat from unclean animals (Deut 14:22); of foreign gods in general (Deut 32:16), as well as the customs of the foreign nations (that is, customs connected with idolatrous worship, 1Ki 14:24). It is a strong word and shows that God has no place whatsoever for worship that has any connection with idols. He neither can tolerate it nor will He allow its inclusion into the worship He has prescribed. Being able to look at this prohibition after the coming of Messiah gives us the advantage of seeing the picture more fully. God’s unflinching position on the issue of idolatry or any kind of syncretism clearly foreshadows the unique and holy sacrifice of Yeshua. For to have offered a defective sacrifice would have been to muddy the picture of Yeshua’s sacrificial death. What we learn instead is that the sacrifice of Yeshua, to which every sacrifice in the Mishkan and Heichal pointed, was in every way perfect and therefore was fully accepted by the Father as accomplishing its goal. It is this impeccable character of Yeshua’s self-sacrifice that makes it fully acceptable before the Father, and by which we may be assured that our sins have, in fact, been entirely expunged before the bar of God’s justice. As the hymn writer August M. Toplady (1772) expressed it:

From whence this fear and unbelief?  
Hath not the Father put to grief His spotless Son for me?  
And will the righteous Judge of men,  
Condemn me for that debt of sin,  
which, Lord, was charged on Thee?

Complete atonement Thou has made,  
And to the utmost farthing paid  
Whate'er Thy people owed:

Nor can His wrath on me take place,  
If sheltered in Thy righteousness,  
And sprinkled with Thy blood.

If Thou has my discharge procured,  
And freely in my room endured the whole of wrath divine;  
Payment God cannot twice demand,  
First at my bleeding Surety's hand,  
And then again at mine.

Turn then, my soul, unto thy rest;  
The merits of thy great High Priest  
Have bought thy liberty:  
Trust in His efficacious blood,  
Nor fear thy banishment from God,  
Since Jesus died for thee.

Thus we may also learn something about the character of God from this, namely, *that He will accept nothing that detracts from the perfections of His Son*. Now we may take this to heart as we approach our own worship. Are there things in which we engage that detract from the glory and perfection of Yeshua? Do we, in any way, bring (as it were) a defective sacrifice in our worship which, by its defect, detracts from the very sacrifice of Yeshua that is central to all our worship?

What would constitute such a defect? (1) believing that we contribute at least part of the price of our redemption, (2) emphasizing the success of the congregation to the exclusion of giving the glory to Yeshua as the Head and Master of our community, (3) failing to speak forth the work of Yeshua for fear of those who have rejected Him, (4) compromising our beliefs in Yeshua as the only means of salvation in order to be accepted by others. This list could go on.

But while bringing a defective sacrifice is clearly linked with idolatry in our text, it is, nonetheless, far less overt than what the *parashah* goes on to describe, i.e., actually worshipping other gods. We might note, however, that the fact that the two are linked together by their close proximity should warn us that overt idolatry begins with the neglect of God's prescriptions regarding worship in the first place.

What is striking about the section which is before us is the unbending severity demanded of Israel in regard to punishing the idolater, as well as the corresponding wrath which God Himself displays. There is no mercy here—brazen idolatry has taken the sinner beyond the place of return.

Our text specifically prohibits the worship of the sun or moon or the stars. This specific prohibition is found only here in the Torah and no doubt is directed toward a paganism that Israel had encountered among her neighbors and with which she, perhaps, was flirting. We may derive this from the phrase “something I never commanded.” It might well have been that some within the nation were actually teaching that God had commanded the worship of the heavenly bodies, and were attempting to get others to follow in their practice by ascribing it to Him. We know that a similar heresy plagued the nation throughout her history, and was likewise a threatening foe among the communities of The Way in the early centuries. Paul speaks of the “elemental things of the world” (Gal 4:3, 9; Col 2:8, 20) which characterized pagan religion and which continued to be a problem among some of the believing communities. These “elemental things of the world” may well be a reference to the notion that the heavenly bodies (sun, moon, stars) governed the lives of people. We know that early Gnosticism gave much credence to such astrology, and that the Apostles taught

against such practice and belief, based no doubt upon the very Torah commandments found in our *parashah*.

Likewise, our society is more and more given to astrology and the occult from which it springs. The so-called “New Age” movement (which is actually not new at all) lays great stress upon the mystical and astrological powers of the planets and stars. Instead of seeing that these were created to give glory to God (Ps 19:1f), they are turned into gods themselves. As those who are called into communion with God through the work of our Messiah, we must give due diligence not to allow any such idolatrous notions to take root in our hearts. Horoscopes, astrological signs, fortune-telling, and all such things, are detestable to God and should be so to us as well.

The punishment for idolatry as prescribed in our *parashah* is severe, but the road to its enactment is just, nonetheless. A person could not be put to death except in the face of two or three witnesses, and then these witnesses must be so sure of their testimony that they would be willing to throw the first stone. Thus, in the face of a severe punishment there is an equal safeguard against the possible misuse of power at the hands of the judges.

And why should the idolaters be put to death? So that the rest of the nation would fear and not follow in their errant ways. Apparently, capital punishment is designed to help keep the offence from spreading. Yes, in God’s economy of things, capital punishment is both a satisfying of His justice as well as a deterrent to such sins.

Now this tells us something about ourselves as created beings, namely, that like it or not, we are affected by the societal changes that happen around us. God knew that allowing idolatry to go unchecked would inevitably lead the nation as a whole into the despicable practice. What we look at most, and think about most often, is what we will inevitably become. “As one thinks in his soul, so he is” (Prov 23:7). It is for this very reason that we must discipline ourselves to study the Torah and meditate on it day and night, for only in conforming our minds to the mind of Messiah will we be able to withstand the influences of our times.

The second section of our *parashah* deals with judicial or *halachic* decisions. Having prescribed the death penalty, the question of what to do when a case is not so clear is discussed. “If a case is too baffling for you to decide....” In our fallen world, the complexities of life’s situations often bring a haze over the correct response. In such a case, the people were to (1) go to the place which God had chosen [=tabernacle location, and finally the Temple in Jerusalem], (2) give the case to the judges and priests there, (3) follow precisely their judgment and the penalty prescribed. “You must not deviate from the verdict that they announce to you either to the right or to the left.” In fact, to disregard the judgment of the “supreme court” of Israel was to incur the death penalty. Thus, the judicial system was clearly hierarchical in Israel (according to the Torah). There was no place for “taking the law into one’s own hands.”

It is interesting that the court with the final judgment convened “in the place where I will choose,” i.e., the place of the Tabernacle or Temple. The judges and priests who rendered the verdict did so in the presence of the God of Israel. Their judgment was to be considered as though God Himself had given the word. Thus, in the situation where Israel possesses the Land, and the priesthood is functioning within the scope of the Temple, the *halachah* they gave forth *was to be followed on par with God’s own written Torah*. It was from this very text that the Sages interpreted the supreme authority of the Oral Torah, though in doing so, they often overstepped their authority by undermining the clear Written Torah. In the 2nd Temple period, the Sanhedrin, which convened in Jerusalem within the Temple precincts, fulfilled this role as judges.

It is clear that God does not sanction rebellion against His appointed judges. No nation or community can long survive if characterized by the spirit of rebellion, for rebellion, at its heart, is idolatry: “For rebellion is as the sin of divination, and insubordination is as iniquity and idolatry” (1Sam 15:23). This does not mean that judges or appointed authorities stand above the Torah itself, nor that people governed by wicked authorities must submit to their debauchery. But it means that when anyone is compelled to disregard or disobey the word of an erring authority, he must do so with clear evidence that the authority has commanded something contrary to the Scriptures. Disregard for the voice of authorities must always be seen as a grave decision and entered into with due consideration.

In addition to the judges and priests, our text anticipates the appointment of a king in Israel who would not only provide leadership and protection for the nation, but would also act as a judge. But unlike the kings of the nations, he was to act as God’s servant, not as an ultimate authority in and of himself. He was not to think that his royal position was something he had gained by his own strength or military prowess, but he was to recognize that God had appointed him to the throne. Thus, the king was to govern as God’s vassal, leading the nation to obey and worship Him.

Our Torah portion also gives other clear requirements for a king in Israel. He could not be a foreigner (the word in our text is נְכַרִי, *nochri*, which usually describes someone from a pagan nation who was still identified with paganism), but was to come “from the midst of your brethren” (בְּקִרְבֵּי אָחֵיךָ). Likewise, the appointed king was not to multiply horses, which means he was not to build such an army as to cause him to rely upon his own military strength rather than upon the power of God. He was not to use his royal position to amass wealth, nor was he to multiply wives, which most likely refers to making political alliances through marriage to daughters of other kings. Such political alliances could lead to compromising the clear and discriminating laws of God.

How was the king to assure that he would fulfill the righteous requirements of his royal position? He was to have his own copy of the Torah, written by himself before the priests (to assure accuracy), and was to study it (“it shall be with him”) and to read it constantly so that as he governed, he would do so in accordance with God’s divine revelation. In other words, the proper discharge of his office could only occur through his personal acquaintance with the Torah, and his willingness to submit to its precepts and commandments. It is interesting that he was to write a copy of the Torah himself. Why? In writing out his own copy in the presence of the Levites, he was personally acknowledging each and every letter, and thus to affirm that the whole of the Torah was that by which he would govern. He could never claim in the future that something in the Torah had been added or deleted, for the copy he had was the product of his own hand in the presence of the Levites. Here we see the emphasis put upon the utter integrity and authority of the written text of the Torah.

From these instructions to the king, we can trace the paradigm from which the United States government was originally founded. Even as the king was subject to the Torah as witnessed by the Levites, so the government envisioned by our founding fathers incorporated the checks and balances which came from the division of power between the judicial, legislative and executive branches. Likewise, the office of the President can only be held by one born in this country, not by a naturalized immigrant or a foreigner. In all of this, the purpose was to guard the highest office in the land from the tyrannical powers our forefathers had experienced under the rule of the English throne. Unfortunately, both the safeguards given in our Torah text for the king of Israel, as well as the parallels in our own nation’s constitution regarding the office of President, have not always

been heeded. Solomon, the second king of Israel, appears to have gone contrary to nearly every thing spoken of in our text! He amassed wealth, military strength, and wives. And the result was calculated: rather than leading Israel in the ways of God, he gave into the idolatry of the nations with whom he had formed alliances (cf. 1Ki 11). Rather than being a guardian of the nation, he introduced those things that took Israel away from God.

Our *haftarah* speaks to this very issue, and its parallel to our Torah *parashah* is obvious. Samuel himself had sons who are called “worthless men” (which is actually בְּנֵי בְלִיַּעַל, “sons of B’liyal”) in 1Sam 2:12. They were acting as judges, but were using their office as a means of gaining personal wealth. They extorted money, accepted bribes (cf. Ex 23:8) and thus perverted justice.

In light of Samuel’s having grown old, and the fact that his sons had proven themselves unwilling to walk in integrity, the elders of the nation come to Samuel requesting the coronation of a king “like all the nations.” It seems clear that they were not looking for the king that God would choose (as our Torah text emphasizes), but a king “like the nations,” that is, a king who would proclaim himself to be divine and thus replace the invisible God of Israel. God makes it clear to Samuel: “...they have not rejected you, but they have rejected Me from being king over them” (v. 7). Acknowledging God to be the King of Israel required faith, for it require accepting what one could not see. “Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (Heb 11:1). In appointing Shaul as the nation’s first king, God gave to them exactly what they requested, but the result was that the nation was not directed to God, but away from Him.

Our Apostolic portion is taken from Paul’s synagogue speech in Pisidian Antioch. There he gives a brief history of Israel’s desire for a king, emphasizing that Shaul, Israel’s first king, was not the divinely chosen king. The proof of this is that the kingdom was taken from Shaul, and his sons did not reign after he was deposed. Rather, God removed Shaul and raised up David in his place, who was God’s chosen king, and from whose descendants would come the Messiah, the greater “son of David,” Who would rule as the eternal King over Israel. Here, in the person of Yeshua, we see the role of King in all of its glory, for the whole life of Yeshua is directed to give glory to the Father. Moreover, it is through the reign of Messiah that His people are assured the eternal rest promised by the Father.

It is interesting to note the manner in which Yeshua fulfills the Torah requirements of a king:

Laws for Kings: Deut 17	Yeshua
must be an Israelite, not a foreigner	... concerning His Son, who was born of a descendant of David according to the flesh, (Rom 1:3)
not to amass wealth	For you know the grace of our Lord Messiah Yeshua, that though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, so that you through His poverty might become rich.” (2Cor 8:9)

<b>Laws for Kings: Deut 17</b>	<b>Yeshua</b>
not to rely upon military strength (increase the number of horses)	Yeshua answered, “My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, then My servants would be fighting so that I would not be handed over to the Jews; but as it is, My kingdom is not of this realm.” (John 18:36)
not to multiply wives	Husbands, love your wives, just as Messiah also loved the assembly and gave Himself up for her (Eph 5:25)
to know and follow the Torah	For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin. (Heb 4:15)