

BECHUKOSAI (LEVITICUS 26:3-27:34)

Your Money or your Wife!

2003 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Seplovitz

How much is a person worth? What is the dollars-and-cents cash value of a human being?

When the Temple stood, a person could pledge a sacrifice to be offered on the Altar. It could be an animal offering or a meal offering. Some offerings were totally burnt on the Altar. The Priests ate some offerings, while others were consumed by the owner of the animal.

A person could also contribute money. This week's Torah Portion addresses the issue of a person who donates his personal value to the Temple. The Torah assigns Shekel values to people of various genders and age groups. One fulfils his vow by donating that assigned value.

It does seem a bit strange that the Torah sets a price for human beings.

The Book of Judges tells us the heartbreaking story of Yiftach, whose poor judgment led to a tragedy for his daughter. Yiftach was praying for success in battle against the Ammonites. He offered G-d a "deal": *"If You deliver Ammon into my hands, the first thing that comes out of my house to greet me, I will offer as a sacrifice."* (Judges, 11:31).

The Talmud says that Yiftach had made an irresponsible vow. Not every animal is acceptable as an offering. If the family cow or his pet lamb had ambled out the door to meet him, either one would have served as a fine Thanksgiving offer on the Altar. But what would he do if he were greeted by Fido or his daughter's pet iguana?!

Actually, the scenario was even worse. Yiftach returns home from battle victorious, full of gratitude to G-d for assisting him. He eagerly anticipates finding an offering with which to express his thanks to his Creator. Will it be his prize bull or a fat lamb? Will it be a milk-producing cow, or perhaps one of his goats? There to greet him he discovers, to his shock . . . his one and only daughter!

In the traditional expression of mourning, Yiftach tore his garment, and tearfully explained that she had been pledged as an offering to be sacrificed to G-d. Yiftach's poor judgment continued to misguide him. He refused to go to the High Priest to request annulment of his vow. ("I'm a leader! Let HIM come to ME!")

As a result, Yiftach's daughter was "sacrificed." She lived the rest of her life as a hermit, unable to marry, serving G-d in solitude.

Yiftach ruined his daughter's life. All he really had to do, if anything, would have been to donate her value as assigned by the Torah. (Depending upon her age, between three and thirty silver Shekels) Actually, the Midrash tells us that he didn't even have to do that! A person has no right to give away something that is not his!

Yiftach's misplaced PIETY led to misplaced PRIORITY. How could this have happened? Would anyone really put such low priority on human life? Consider the following:

The Torah Commands us to love G-d "...with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your resources." (Deuteronomy, 6:5) The Talmud explains that the Torah is telling us that we must resist forced conversion to other religions at all costs. We should be willing to give up our lives for our faith ("with all your soul"). We should also be willing to give up our money ("with all your resources") for our faith.

There is an obvious question here: Once the Torah tells us that we are required to forfeit our very lives for our religion, doesn't it follow that we should certainly be willing to part with our possessions?!

Not necessarily. Some people actually attach a greater value to their money than they do to their lives. That's why they drive themselves, to the detriment of their own health and familial relationships, in pursuit of the almighty dollar. ("We ruin our health to acquire wealth. Then we spend all of our wealth in order to regain our health!")

The Torah "assigns" a monetary value to a human life. Not that there is such a value. Every human being, created in G-d's image, is priceless. The Torah is telling us to maintain perspective. We are not USUALLY required to give up our lives for Torah (with a few rare exceptions.) Rather, we are supposed to take those material possessions that G-d gives us, and channel them toward good purposes.

It has been observed that it is relatively easy to **GIVE** one's life for G-d. (Look at all the misguided murderers who blow themselves to pieces, expecting eternal life in a perverted paradise.)

It is a much bigger challenge to **LIVE** one's life for G-d.

Have a great Shabbos.

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