



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

VAYIKRA > Emor

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Emor

True Vision: An I for an I



Meaningful Sermons *“Words from the Heart Enter the Heart”*

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ABSTRACT

Imagine if, every time you hurt someone, that same injury would be inflicted upon you as punishment. It may make mathematical, symmetrical sense but doesn't it seem cruel? You knock out someone's tooth in a fight, and your tooth gets automatically pulled out in retribution. It sounds barbaric – like something out of the Middle Ages (or the Middle East).

But isn't it exactly what the Torah proscribes when it says, *An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth?*

Is this to be taken literally? If yes, how is that humane? If not, how come it's written that way?

To find an answer, let us explore a fascinating Talmudic decision, anchored by Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, the author of the Zohar, whose passing we will commemorate this coming Thursday on Lag B'Omer.

Let us also examine an ingenious teaching of the Vilna Gaon, the Genius of Vilna. As well, let us take a look at the mystical explanation of the monumental 13th century Italian rabbi, known as the Recanti.

This is how our eyes shall be opened. For we must read *an eye for an eye* as “an I for an I.”

TRUE VISION: AN I FOR AN I

1. Eye Problem (Joke)

A woman walks into an optical store to return a pair of spectacles that she purchased for her husband a week before.

The clerk asks, “What seems to be the problem, Madam?”

The woman replies, “I’m returning these spectacles I bought for my husband. He’s still not seeing things my way.”

2. Parshat Emor

That’s some eye problem!

But putting humor aside, we all have to acknowledge how important eyes – and vision – are in our lives. Eyes are essential. With eyes we can see. Without them we are blind (G-d forbid).

So how do we protect our eyes? And how do we make sure we see properly? How do we implement the divine vision for the perfect, most-meaningful universe? How do we see things G-d’s way?

Eyes bring to mind one of the most famous expressions in all the Torah: *an eye for an eye*, which – read literally – suggests that that if you injure someone’s eye, you must pay for your act with your own eye.

This law is first stated in the Book of Exodus,¹ and then repeated again in the Book of Leviticus – in *Parshat Emor*, which is this week’s Torah reading:

¹ Exodus 21:24. Cf. Deuteronomy 19:21.

[Regarding] a man who inflicts an injury upon his fellow man – as he did so shall be done to him. A fracture for a fracture, an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. Just as he inflicted an injury upon a person, so shall it be inflicted upon him.²

Does this mean that every time you hurt someone, that same injury must be inflicted upon you as punishment? It may make mathematical, symmetrical sense but doesn't it seem cruel? You knock out someone's tooth in a fight, and your tooth gets automatically pulled out in retribution. It sounds barbaric – like something out of the Middle Ages (or the Middle East). [And indeed, many a Bible critic has used this statement to demonstrate the “primitive” and “archaic” savagery of early religion].

But isn't it exactly what the Torah proscribes when it says, *An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth?*

Is this to be taken literally? If yes, how is that humane? If not, how come it's written that way?

3. Lag B'Omer

This coming Thursday is Lag B'Omer, when we commemorate the passing of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, also known as Rashbi, who was a great Talmudic sage and also the author of the Zohar, the classic work of Jewish mysticism.

Rashbi is among the sages in the Talmud that teaches that the Torah's statement “an eye for an eye” is not to be interpreted literally. Rather, if someone blinds another, then he must make amends not by being blinded himself, but by paying monetary damages.³ It is Jewish law that in all matters of physical injury, a monetary value is to be assessed and restitution made accordingly.

² Leviticus 24:20.

³ *ava Kama* 83b-84a, quoted by Rashi to Exodus 21:24, Leviticus 24:20. See also *Torah Shleimah*, vol. 17, p. 263.

Since Rashbi teaches this principle, we are moved to ask if perhaps there is a mystical connection here – if the Torah’s unusual language, *an eye for an eye*, hides a deeper meaning?

Why does the verse not explicitly state that it means monetary compensation, instead of being vague and leaving room for misunderstanding, necessitating interpretation from the Oral Torah in the Talmud?

4. Unequivocal Language

The Torah’s language may be unusual and cryptic⁴ but it is unequivocal. And thus it stresses the seriousness of this law. If it simply stated that in an event of an injury, the perpetrator had to pay a penalty, there would be those who might calculate that it’s worth it. As the Talmud illustrates:

The scoundrel Chanan, having injured another man’s ear, was brought before Rabbi Huna, who ordered him to pay the man half a *zuz*. [In ancient times, a *zuz* was worth a day’s wages.] As he only had a whole *zuz*, Chanan went looking for change. But, because the coin he had was warped, he couldn’t get it exchanged. So he hit the poor fellow in the ear again and gave him the whole *zuz*.⁵

If people were allowed to routinely behave this way, it would make a mockery of justice, and potentially cause great harm. Rich people could theoretically not be concerned with harming others without any consequences save money, which they could readily afford. The Torah therefore states *an eye for an eye* to emphasize the gravitas of this law.

By stating *an eye for an eye*, the Torah is saying in so many words, “Really, we should punish you by inflicting upon you that which you inflicted upon another. It is only out of necessity (and compassion) that we replace the corporal punishment due you with a pecuniary penalty.”

⁴ See also Ramban and Ibn Ezra to Exodus 21:24. Rambam, Guide for the Perplexed 3:41; Hilchot Chovel u’Mazik 6.

⁵ Bava Kama 37a.

This is one way to look at it. But I want to suggest that there may be more layers to this story, and that there is a more fundamental reason for the Torah's choice of words.

5. The Vilna Gaon's Explanation

The Vilna Gaon, the 18th century "Genius of Vilna," has a highly original and fascinating explanation:⁶

He calls attention to the actual Hebrew wording, which is *ayin tachat ayin* – literally, "an eye beneath an eye."

This, he says, teaches us that to assess the punishment for damaging an eye, *ayin*, we must look *tachat*, "beneath" the *ayin*.

The Hebrew word *ayin* is composed of three letters, *ayin*, *yud* and *nun*. The letters directly "beneath" (following) each of these letters are *pey* (which follows/is beneath the *ayin*), *chof* (beneath the *yud*) and *samach* (beneath the *nun*). These three letters (when scrambled) spell the word *keseif*, meaning "money."

So ... for the punishment of knocking out an eye, an *ayin*, look beneath the *ayin*, and you shall find *keseif*, money. Therefore, an injury to an eye requires monetary compensation not punishment with another, similar injury.

This explanation by the Vilna Gaon is quite original, but it still leaves a couple of questions unanswered: Why do we have to engage in this "game" to discover the real intent of the Torah? And, although this clever explanation works for the eye (*ayin*) what about the tooth, the fracture, etc.?

⁶ Kol Eliyahu, Mishpatim.

6. The Recanti's Interpretation

The great 13th century Italian mystic, Rabbi Menachem ben Benyamin, known as the Recanati, interprets the verse in a most beautiful and cosmic manner.⁷

His interpretation relies on an established Talmudic principle that there are “seventy faces to the Torah”⁸ – that is, seventy ways to interpret every letter, word and verse of the Torah. To convey each one of these seventy layers of meaning, G-d authored the Torah in a very specific manner, one that on the face of it may seem to use unique phraseology or unexpected parlance.

The Recanti cites an example of this principle from our Torah reading. He says that, in addition to conveying a straightforward law in how to punish bodily harm, the Torah is also teaching us a cosmic lesson, one that reveals the spirit of the law, which is its actual and essential purpose.

This is how the Recanti reads the Hebrew of our verse:

- *v'ish ki yiten mum b'amito* – when a person inflicts injury upon a member of his people
- *kasher asah ken ye'aseh lo* – as he has done to his fellow, so shall be done to Him; in this case the word, *lo* meaning “him” is referring to the capital “Him” or G-d, so that it reads, “when you injure someone of your people you are also injuring G-d Himself”
- *shever tachat shever* – when you fracture a person, the result is a fracture Above
- *ayin tachat ayin* – when you damage an eye of a person, you damage G-d's vision for the world
- *shen tachat shen* – a tooth on earth corresponds to a tooth in heaven

⁷ Commentary to Mishpatim, quoted by the Shalah, Torah Shebichtav, Mishpatim.

⁸ Numbers Rabbah 13:15.

- *kasher yiten mum b'adam ken yinaten bo* – as you inflict an injury upon man so do you inflict it upon him, or “Him,” meaning G-d

The Recanti says that in order to convey this profound and paradigm-shifting lesson, the Torah must write the verses in this and in no other way, even though it may not be readily understood that the punishment (here on earth) is pecuniary and not literal.

7. Personal Lesson

What does this mean on a personal level?

Every time you interact with another human being, you must remember that you are interacting with G-d.

Thus, when you are kind to your fellow people, assisting them in fulfilling their vision and dreams, lending them a helping hand in this regard, then you are doing the same thing for G-d. You are assisting Him in His universal vision, realizing His divine dream, and helping to implement it. And in turn, you are also helping your own vision and faculties.

If, however, you damage another's vision – or any other part of them – then we are hurting G-d's vision as well. And in turn our own vision as well.

On a literal level, you – and we all – must be kind and constructive with our fellow people in order to have a healthy world. This is why this Torah law has monetary consequences. But on a much deeper, soulful and essential level, we must be kind and constructive to our fellow people because this is how we complete G-d's vision and plan for existence.

If every time we looked at another human being, we saw *not* another human being but a divine image, would not our interpersonal interaction be enhanced? Would not our universe be a different type of place?

So you see, from this one verse, the Torah teaches us the profoundest of lessons.

8. New Way of Seeing (Story)

A blind boy sat on the steps of a building with a hat by his feet. He held up a sign that said: "I am blind, please help." There were only a few coins in his hat.

A man came walking by. He took a few coins from his pocket and dropped them into the hat. He then took the sign, turned it around, and wrote some words on it. He put the sign back so that everyone who walked by would see what he wrote.

Soon the hat began to fill up. A lot more people were giving money to the blind boy than ever before. That afternoon the man who had changed the sign came to see how things were going. The boy recognized his footsteps and asked, "Were you the one who changed my sign this morning? What did you write?"

The man said, "I only wrote the truth. I said the same thing you said but in a different way."

What the man had written on the sign was: "Today is a beautiful day and I cannot see it."

Were not the first sign and the second sign really saying the same thing?

Of course, both signs told people the boy was blind. But the first sign simply said the boy was blind. The second sign elicited empathy from the people, by telling them that they were so lucky that they could see the beautiful day, and thus feel compassion for this blind person who cannot. Should we be surprised that the second sign was more effective?

Perspective is everything. When we realize that as we work together, we can see the beauty and celestial vision of the world, then there is no way we would ever hurt, inflict or damage another human being.

We must always remember: we are not island to ourselves. We are all connected. Helping another is helping G-d and the universe. Hurting another is hurting G-d and the universe.

Ayin tachat ayin – an eye for an eye – your eye is one with G-d’s eye, your eye is one with another person’s eye.

9. Eyesight (Optional Joke)

Sadie is in bad shape and goes to see her doctor. She says, “Doctor Myers, what’s wrong with me? Just look at the state of my face. When I woke up this morning, I glanced in the mirror and nearly fainted at what I saw. My hair has gone grey and is starting to fall out, my lovely skin has become horribly wrinkled and both my eyes are bloodshot and bulging from their sockets. I look like someone who has just died. What on earth is wrong with me?”

Doctor Myers gives Sadie a quick examination, looks her in the eyes and says to her, “Well, I can say one thing I’ve discovered, there’s nothing wrong with your eyesight!”

10. Conclusion

An eye for an eye – when we injure (literally or metaphorically) the vision of another, we are injuring G-d’s vision, and in effect – our own vision. For there is no way to implement the divine vision for the world while hurting another human being.

There is something terribly wrong with our eyesight if we see other people as stepping stools to elevate ourselves, as stools to step over while we achieve our perceived ends.

The Torah provides us with 20/20 vision, perfect eyesight, enabling us to see things as they really are – beautiful and holy.

This is the secret of the eye – and the eye for an eye. This is how the Torah reveals the greatest secrets of the I – with the capital “I” – teaching us all how one I is there to help another I.

It’s not an eye [point to eye] for an eye – it’s an I [point to self] for an I.

Shabbat Shalom!

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