

# Lesson 10 - Letting Go, Rehabilitation, Hate, and Animal Welfare

## Letting Go

Moses delivers a command so counter-intuitive that we have to read it twice to make sure we have heard it correctly: ["Do not hate an Edomite, because he is your brother. Do not hate an Egyptian, because you were a stranger in his land"](#) (Deut. 23:8).

What does this mean in its biblical context? The Egyptians of Moses' day had enslaved the Israelites, "embittered their lives", subjected them to a ruthless regime of hard labour, and forced them to eat the bread of affliction. They had embarked on a program of attempted genocide, Pharaoh commanding his people to throw "every male [Israelite] child born into the river" . Now, forty years later, Moses speaks as if none of this had happened.

If you want to preserve freedom, he implies, never forget what it feels like to lose it. Moses tells the people, "Do not hate an Egyptian." What is going on in this verse? To be free, you have to let go of hate. That is what Moses is saying. You cannot create a free society on the basis of hate.

Resentment, rage, humiliation, a sense of injustice, the desire to restore honor by inflicting injury on your former persecutors – these are conditions of a profound lack of freedom. You must live with the past, implies Moses, but not in the past.

**Biblical ethics is based on repeated acts of role reversal, using memory as a moral force.**

[If a fellow Hebrew, a man or a woman, sells himself to you and serves you six years, in the seventh year you must let him go free. When you release him, do not send him away empty-handed. Supply him liberally from your flock, your threshing floor, and your winepress. Give to him as the Lord your God has blessed you. Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and the Lord your God redeemed you. That is why I give you this command today. \(Deut. 15:12–15\)](#) Slavery needs "narrative closure."

To acquire freedom, a slave must be able to leave without feelings of antagonism to his former master. Hatred and liberty cannot coexist. A free people does not hate its former enemies; if it does, it is not yet ready for freedom.

**That was Moses' message to those who were about to enter the Promised Land: that a free society can be built only by people who accept the responsibility of freedom, subjects who refuse to see themselves as objects, people who define themselves by love of God, not hatred of the other.**

## Rehabilitation of Offenders

When people have a dispute, they shall take it to court and the judges will decide the case, acquitting the innocent and condemning the guilty. If the guilty person deserves to be beaten, the judge shall make him lean over and have him flogged in his presence with the number of lashes his crime deserves, but he must not give him more than forty lashes. If he is flogged more than that, your brother will be degraded in your eyes. (Deut. 25:1–3)

The sages derived from this a fundamental principle, namely, the rehabilitation of an offender once he has served his punishment. The principle that “once he has been beaten, he becomes [again] your brother” was taken to mean that the human punishment cancels the divine punishment. Once the offender has been beaten, there is no residual guilt. When the guilty has received the punishment his offence deserved, he is restored to his earlier status.

The rule is that in the case of robbery, the guilty party must return what he has taken to its rightful owner (“He shall restore that which he took by robbery” [Lev. 5:23]). This makes obvious sense. If a robber were allowed merely to make monetary compensation rather than return the stolen object, the law would, in effect, allow someone to acquire an object – albeit at a price – by violence. That must be wrong.

The rules of rehabilitation are complex, and I make no attempt to summarize them here. Yet it is clear that from earliest times the sages tempered their concern for justice with a desire to help criminals and wrongdoers find their way back to honesty and society. What mandated them to do so was the teaching of the prophet Ezekiel:

Son of man, say to the house of Israel: This is what you have been saying, “Our offences and sins weigh heavily on us, and we are sick at heart because of them. How can we survive?” Say to them, “As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign Lord, I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live.” (Ezek. 33:10–12)

Jewish law is concerned not only with protecting the rights of those who have been wronged, but also helping wrongdoers rebuild their future. **Guilt, in Judaism, is about acts, not persons. It is the act, not the person, that is condemned. Once the criminal has served his punishment and repented of his crime, he becomes, once more, “your brother.”**

## Hate Curable and Incurable

Remember what the Amalekites did to you along the way when you came out of Egypt. When you were weary and worn out, they met you on your journey and attacked all who were lagging behind; they had no fear of God. When the Lord your God gives you rest from all the enemies around you in the land He is giving you to possess as an inheritance, you shall blot out the name of Amalek from under heaven. Do not forget. (Deut. 25:17–19)

Moses commands: "Do not hate an Egyptian, because you were a stranger in his land" (Deut. 23:8). The Amalekites did no more than attack the Israelites once,<sup>1</sup> an attack that was successfully repelled (Ex. 17:13). Yet Moses commands: "Remember." "Do not forget." "Blot out the name."

The same applies to hate. **When hate is rational, based on some fear or disapproval that – justified or not – has some logic to it, then it can be reasoned with and brought to an end. But unconditional, irrational hatred cannot be reasoned with.** There is nothing one can do to address it and end it. It persists. That was the difference between the Amalekites and the Egyptians.

The Egyptians feared the Israelites because they were numerous. They constituted a potential threat to the native population. It was not irrational for the Egyptians to fear that the Hebrews were another such population. They feared the Israelites because they were strong.

Precisely the opposite was true of the Amalekites. They attacked the Israelites when they were "weary and worn out." They focused their assault on those who were "lagging behind." Those who are weak and lagging behind pose no danger. This was irrational, groundless hate. With rational hate – like that displayed by the Egyptians – it is possible to reason. But with irrational hate – like that of the Amalekites – it is impossible to reason. It has no cause, no logic. Therefore it may never go away. Irrational hate is as durable and persistent as irrational love.

**Anti-Semitism is different from xenophobia. It is the paradigm case of irrational hatred.** The European Enlightenment, with its worship of science and reason, was expected to end all such hatred. Instead it gave rise to a new version of it, racial anti-Semitism. In the nineteenth century, Jews were hated because they were rich and because they were poor; because they were capitalists and because they were communists; because they were exclusive and kept to themselves and because they infiltrated everywhere;

## Animal Welfare

Tanakh does regard animals as sentient beings. They may not think or speak, but they do feel. They are capable of distress. Therefore there is such a thing as animal distress. "When you come [to work] in your neighbour's vineyard, you may eat as many grapes as you desire to satisfy your hunger.... When you come [to work] in your neighbour's standing grain, you may take the ears with your hand" (Deut. 23:25–26). It is cruel to prevent those working with food from eating some of it. The parallel is instructive. Animals, not just humans, have feelings and they must be respected. Another law is: "Do not plough with an ox and donkey together" (Deut. 22:10). The ox is stronger than a donkey, so expecting the donkey to do the work of an ox is cruel. Each animal species has its integrity, its role, its niche in the scheme of creation that we must respect.

If you come across a bird's nest beside the road, either in a tree or on the ground, and the mother is sitting on the young or on the eggs, do not take the mother with the young. You may take the young, but be sure to let the mother go, so that it may go well with you and you may have a long life. (Deut. 22:6–7)

We are forbidden to cause needless suffering to animals because this will desensitize us and lead us eventually to be cruel to human beings. Maimonides thus seems to embrace three sharply conflicting views:

1. The law of the mother bird is a divine decree with no reason.
2. It is intended to spare the mother bird emotional pain.
3. It is intended to have an effect on us, not the animal, by training us not to be cruel.

The first view explains why we have the laws we have. The Torah forbids certain acts that are cruel to animals but not others. Why these and not those? **Because that is the law. Laws will always seem arbitrary.** Why, for example, is one permitted to drive at thirty miles an hour in a city, but not thirty-one? Why not set the bar at twenty-nine?

The second view explains the immediate logic of the law. It exists to prevent needless suffering to animals, because they too feel physical pain and sometimes emotional distress as well. T

The third view sets the law in a larger perspective. Cruelty to animals is wrong, not because animals have rights but because we have duties. The duty not to be cruel is intended to promote virtue, and the primary context of virtue is the relationship between human beings. But virtues are indivisible.

**Judaism also reminds us of what we sometimes forget: that the moral life is too complex to summarize in a single concept like "rights." Alongside rights, there are duties, and there can be duties without corresponding rights. Animals do not have rights, but we have duties towards them.**