



### The Broken Windows Theory

*There was an article in the early 1980s [1] about a sociological study called the Broken Windows Theory. "Social psychologists and police officers tend to agree," they wrote, "that if a window in a building is broken and left unrepaired, all the rest of the windows will soon be broken. This is as true in nice neighborhoods as in run-down ones. Window breaking does not necessarily occur on a large scale because some areas are inhabited by determined window-breakers whereas others are inhabited by window-lovers. Rather, one unrepaired broken window is a signal that no one cares, and so breaking more windows costs nothing."*

*William Bratton, who later described one of the study's authors as an intellectual mentor, took this theory seriously. In 1990, when he was appointed head of the New York City Transit Police, he began enforcing laws that had long been ignored: fare evasion, graffiti, sleeping on subways, and other seemingly minor infractions. In 1993, after Rudy Giuliani was elected mayor, Bratton was appointed Police Commissioner of the entire city, where he expanded this approach. Public drinking, public urination, vandalism, pickpocketing — nothing was considered too small to address. The results were astonishing. As petty crimes declined, major crimes fell dramatically as well. By restoring order at the lowest levels, Giuliani and Bratton repaired a city that had once seemed irreparably broken.*

An intriguing question arises in this week's parsha. Why does the Torah place the laws governing the Jewish slave immediately before the laws of capital punishment? What connection exists between the treatment of a penniless thief and murder — the most severe crime imaginable?

R' Samson Raphael Hirsch offers a profound answer. He explains that the unifying theme of the mitzvot in this section is *kavod ha'briyot* — basic human dignity and respect. The Torah is teaching a fundamental principle about society: respect begins at the bottom. The true moral standing of a community is not measured by how it treats its elites, but by how it treats its most vulnerable members.

The Jewish slave is not a victim of circumstance alone; he is someone who stole and lacked the means to repay his debt. He occupies the lowest rung of the social ladder. Yet the Torah insists that he be treated with dignity, humanity, and respect. How a society treats this individual determines how it views human life as a whole. When respect for the person at the

bottom is absolute, that respect naturally extends upward—to neighbors, to strangers, and ultimately to every human being.

As respect erodes, so does restraint. Insults lead to animosity. Petty theft gives way to assault. Vandalism escalates into violence. When small transgressions are tolerated, the moral fabric of society begins to unravel, and the final consequence is murder. Just as in the Broken Windows Theory, neglecting the "minor" violations signals that standards no longer matter — and once that message is sent, there is no logical stopping point.

R' Hirsch teaches that whatever a society tolerates at its lowest level will ultimately define its highest level. That is why the Torah establishes uncompromising standards for how even a penniless thief must be treated. Rather than isolating criminals in prisons — where they often idle, socialize with other offenders, and emerge unchanged or worse — the Torah mandates rehabilitation through responsibility and dignity. The slave becomes part of a household. He works productively. He witnesses firsthand what it means to live with respect. If there is only one pillow, it belongs to him. He eats the same food as his master. Through years of being treated as a human being of worth, he is rebuilt from the inside.

This system does not merely reform individuals; it fortifies society itself. By embedding dignity and respect into the lowest rungs of communal life, the Torah addresses the roots of violence and crime more effectively than any punitive system ever could. When society repairs its broken windows — when it refuses to overlook the small breaches of decency — it preserves the sanctity of human life at every level. [2]

On an individual level, as well, we can take lesson from this. A lot of the bigger issues we face are often addressed by taking steps that fix the smaller things. When we take responsibility for the seemingly minor habits we tolerate, we create the foundation for meaningful change in the larger challenges we hope to overcome.

[1] James Q. Wilson and George L. Kelling, "Broken Windows," *The Atlantic*, March 1982.

[2] Based on a d'var Torah shared by R' Leiby Burnham

*"Hashem doesn't need your perfection; He needs your connection." (R' YY Jacobson)*