



In certain specific circumstances, a special penalty is imposed for stealing livestock. The penalty for stealing a bull is greater than that for stealing a sheep.

The Text:

Rabbi Yochanan ben Zachai said: G-d cares about human dignity. [In the case of a] bull, which walks on its [own] feet, and the thief was not degraded by carrying it on his shoulder, he pays five; [in the case of a sheep] that he carries on his shoulder, he pays four, since he has been degraded.

[Rashi to Exodus 22:37]

Question:

Does a burglar mind carrying a sheep on his shoulder? He steals in secret, and no one sees him! Besides, he chooses to steal; any indignity is self-inflicted – and probably irrelevant to him. Why does he deserve a reduction in punishment?

Answer:

The thief may be laughing all the way to the bank, oblivious to any slight to his honor. But although he may *think* he doesn't care, the pain of humiliation is felt subconsciously, in the depths of his soul. He may not realize it, but G-d does – and reduces his punishment accordingly.

Message:

Human dignity is rooted not in social convention but in our innate spirituality. Every human being, from the most refined aristocrat to the lowest thief, possesses this nobility, and is keenly sensitive to a slight to his dignity. We must strive to sensitize ourselves to the inherent greatness in others – and in ourselves.

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The Jews have experienced Revelation at Sinai and received the Ten Commandments.

Mishpatim means “Laws;” this Parsha lists a variety of laws, many pertaining to other people’s property. A sampling of topics includes:

- Limitations on the term of an indentured servant; a husband’s obligation to provide for his wife; the distinction between murder and accidental killing.
- Personal injury and property damage, which take four basic forms:
 - A **human being** who injures another human being is liable for as many as five separate payments: permanent loss of ability to work, temporary loss of ability to work while recuperating, medical expenses, physical pain and embarrassment. [The oft-misinterpreted “eye for an eye,” found in this Parsha, means payment of the eye’s *monetary value*.]
 - An **ox** or any other animal can cause damage by “walking” or “eating” – normal activities – or “goring” – willful destruction. In the latter case, a distinction is drawn between a first-time offender and a habitual “goring ox,” which has done so three times. [Hence the concept that “three times establishes a trend,” a principle with bearing on many areas of Jewish law.]
 - A **pit** or other obstacle in the public domain.
 - Fire** or other inanimate object that travels by forces of nature.
- Liability of a watchman:
 - An **unpaid watchman** is liable only for negligence.
 - A **paid watchman** is liable even for loss or theft.
 - A **borrower** is liable for any mishap that occurs.
- The prohibition against harassing widows, orphans and converts; the obligation to offer a free loan to those in need, and the prohibition against charging interest; the obligation to return lost objects, and the prohibition against ignoring them; the commandment to assist a traveler whose beast of burden has collapsed– even if he happens to be your enemy.
- A summary of the Jewish holidays.
- The prohibition against combining meat and milk.

The Parsha concludes with a flashback to the events preceding the Revelation at Sinai. The Jewish People declared, “All that G-d has spoken we shall do and we shall hear –” indicating their readiness to *do* what G-d would command, even before they had a chance to *hear* what He expected of them. G-d was greatly pleased by this expression of faith and trust in Him.

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