

As you may have guessed by the late dates of this year's holidays, 5784 is a leap year, in Hebrew a *shannah me'uberet*, a "pregnant year." In order to keep the seasons of our lunar year (354.37 days) aligned with the prevailing solar year (365.25 days), a second month of Adar, the 12th month of our Jewish year, is added seven times within a 19-year cycle. Coincidentally, this is also a leap year on the Gregorian calendar, which adds a 29th day to the short month of February. Without this 13th month, the approximately 11-day difference between the two systems would cause our holidays to move through the year irrespective of the seasons to which the Torah ties them. Before the Jewish year was formally established, the Sanhedrin declared the new months based on sightings of the new moon. The first attempts to mathematically determine a calendar occurred around 70 CE, after the destruction of the Temple, and by the end of the 4th century the number of days in each month were fixed and the second month of Adar added. The final determination of the Jewish calendar as we know it today is attributed to Hillel II to provide cohesion in response to increased repression following the Christianization of Rome in the 4th century, but recent research indicates that some of the calculations, including the 19-year cycle, were established as late as the 8th century. Leap years occur in years 3, 6, 8, 11, 14, 17, and 19, and in those years we read each parashah separately rather than doubling up on some of them. Each month of our Jewish year has a special significance. Nisan is the Month of Liberation, and leading up to it is Adar, the 30-day month of joy, when Haman's genocidal plot was thwarted. In leap years, joy is doubled, and 60 is also an important number in other ways. Talmud Tractate Berakhot 57b teaches: "There are five matters in our world which are 1/60 of their most extreme manifestations ... Our fire is 1/60 of the fire of Gehenna; honey is 1/60 of manna; Shabbat is 1/60 of the World-to-Come; sleep is 1/60 of death; and a dream is 1/60 of prophecy. 60 also represents transformation according to the principle of nullifying non-kosher foods when they are inadvertently mixed into kosher food 60 times their volume, as outlined in Talmud Tractate Chullin 98. Thus, the Lubavitcher Rebbe reminds us that in a year containing 60 days of Adar, all detriments such as pain and despair are nullified by Adar's transformative joy. How appropriate then to be reading Parashah Mishpatim right now, in which the beginnings of a law code based on the revolutionary concept of legal equality and rooted in accountability to HaShem are outlined. Parashah Mishpatim (Ordinances), also known as *Sefer haBrit* (Book of the Covenant), is a thumbnail sketch of the laws defining the broader principles set forth last week in what we commonly call the Ten Commandments. It is a collection of civil and tort law as well as an enumeration of moral imperatives. The former includes the famous and unfortunately often misunderstood *lex talionis* – eye for eye, tooth for tooth, etc. In the Daf Yomi program in which I participate (a daily page of Talmud), we are in the thickets of Tractate Bava Kamma, the first of three tractates in the order Nezikin (Damages). It deals with tort law, primarily damage caused by property (animals, for example) as well as damage inflicted by people. Of course it discusses *lex talionis* in detail, outlining its intrinsic problems and concluding that because a literal reading is both impractical and illogical, "eye for eye" must be interpreted as monetary compensation. One of the most noteworthy arguments against literal interpretation are the questions of who pays for medical treatment after said eye, tooth, or limb is removed, and how can one compensate for pain when taking into account differing thresholds of pain. Among the many moral imperatives, i.e. statutes concerning social justice, is the first mention of the reason for not mistreating strangers: "You shall not aggrrieve a stranger, nor shall you oppress him, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt." (21:20) The word גֵר (*ger*) deriving from the root גוּר – to dwell, means stranger, foreigner, convert. One of the Talmud's explanations is, "A defect that is in you, do not mention it in another. Since the Jewish people were themselves strangers, they are not in a position to demean a convert because he is a stranger in their midst." In other words, "And you shall not oppress a stranger, for you know the feelings of the stranger, since you were strangers in the land of Egypt." (23:9) The word יָדַע (know) in this development of 21:20 implies awareness on a visceral level. We Jews know all too well what it means to be strangers, to be marginalized and persecuted, and this should awaken our empathy and inspire us to do everything in our power to prevent this from happening to others. Sadly, many people lack empathy, even to the extent of transferring their own suffering onto others in retribution. This is an illogical misinterpretation and egregious misuse of *lex talionis*. Bava Metzia reminds us that "the Torah issue[s] warnings in 36 places, and some say in 46 places, with regard to causing any distress to a stranger." The Torah's most often repeated commandment is the bedrock of the precepts by which those who proclaim adherence to "Judeo-Christian values" should live, but in today's fractured world distrust and fear of strangers is supplanting this high ideal and causing untold harm. None of us is immune to this pernicious change of heart once suffering is behind us. Tragically, affluence and power not only breed forgetfulness of former suffering, but also generate fear of returning to it. And it is this fear that creates the "us versus them" mentality that is once again causing so much discord. Of course not all strangers come with good intentions, but condemning an entire group for the misdeeds of some flies in the face of the laws and precepts of our Torah. There are no easy answers for today's complex issues, but we must always strive to view each human being as an individual worthy of our consideration, remembering that our own security is not guaranteed, and that we all are strangers somewhere in the world.

Shabbat shalom!