

# RITUAL PURITY AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

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Few of us would dispute the *moral* and *ethical* teachings of the Torah—whether or not we believe in God, and regardless of the certainty or tenuousness of our connection to Judaism. We wouldn't argue that, as a rule, stealing is either desirable or defensible for society, regardless of whether we personally take things that belong to others without their permission. We wouldn't argue that physically assaulting someone is desirable or defensible, regardless of whether we personally have ever done so. And, certainly, we could extend this kind of list almost without limit.

We are, however, almost equally unanimous in our rejection of the Torah's teachings regarding *ritual purity*. Few modern Jews would agree that there is any convincing or compelling reason to keep kosher, regardless of our personal practice. Few modern Jews would agree that there is any convincing or compelling reason to go to a *mikvah* before one's marriage or conversion, or after meneses. And this list can also be extended almost without limit.

There is another aspect of these modern Jewish views of the *usefulness* of Torah's teaching of ethics and morals and *uselessness* of Torah's teachings on ritual purity. The modern liberal view is that the two are unconnected and that, while the former is reasonable and relevant, the latter is unfathomable and unnecessary. The implication is that, of course, as individuals we may choose to accept one group of teachings and to reject the other, because one is useful and one is not, and the two are entirely unrelated.

These two groups of Torah teachings are known as statutes and ordinances (or judgments)—*chukim* (חוקים) and *mishpatim* (משפטים).

Let's deal with the second group first: the ordinances—*mishpatim*. These are laws affecting the relations *between human beings* in our social, political, and economic life. These commandments correspond to our intuitive idea of justice, what we would be likely to legislate for ourselves if the Torah had not given them to us—such as the prohibitions against robbery and murder.

The *chukim*, on the other hand, often said to be unfathomable by human intelligence, are supposed to inculcate “moral wholesomeness” in our individual and family life. But *how* is the question—which we'll return to momentarily.

In *parashat hashavua* (weekly Torah portion) Acharei Mot, we read: “My ordinances shall you

do, and my statutes you shall keep, to walk in them. . . .”—*lalechet bahem* (ללכת בהם). (Leviticus 18:4) “And you shall therefore keep My statutes and My ordinances, which if a person does them shall live in them. . . .” (18:5) We are commanded to keep *both* statutes and ordinances.

But how can we even consider the idea of accepting and practicing teachings that are, by definition, unfathomable?

Rabbi Josef Dov Soloveitchik (1903-1993), one of the great rabbis of the 20th century, said that we do this when the inner image of God within us recognizes truths that are beyond ordinary human understanding. For instance, many of our most important decisions—such as our choice of particular ideals and people to love and make sacrifices for—express what may be called a “light from within,” which reflects our true inner self.

But Rabbi Samson Rafael Hirsch (1808-1888) teaches that the *chukim* do, in fact, have an explicit purpose. That purpose is to place limits on sensuality and, thereby, to teach free-willed moral self-control, which is not instinctive or intuitive behavior for humankind—in fact, quite the contrary. The goal is for us to acquire the discipline necessary to set boundaries around the animal side of our human nature, that which would have us respond without restraint to our sensual desires, as if we were animals.

Unquestionably, the *chukim* and *mishpatim* are inextricably linked—ritual purity and social justice are reciprocally related. First, ignoring laws regulating sexual life and the building of family, failing to control our appetites and raise our children with wholesome models, leads to the moral degeneration, first of the individual and then of the family. Second, morally wholesome family life is the foundation, first of community and then of national life, which upholds justice and love of our fellow human beings. And third, without social justice and human rights, as in slave societies, the first victims are moral individual and family life, because survival becomes paramount and one no longer has control over the conditions of one's existence.

It is virtually impossible to imagine a society of justice and human rights without an underlying cultural foundation that nurtures moral individual and family life, and it is virtually impossible to imagine a society of moral individual and family life without a just society that protects the institutions and practices that sustain such life.

Rabbi Hirsch concluded: A society characterized by justice and love cannot exist without a foundation of moral individuals. And the laws of justice and love that God has decreed for human society, the *mishpatim*, presuppose that the majority of us have been conceived, born, raised, and lived our lives guided by laws of sexual and family morality, the *chukim*.

What does that mean for those of us modern Jews who have rejected traditional morality in favor of our own personal preferences?

If we acknowledge that the connection between *chukim* and *mishpatim*, between ritual purity and social justice, is inextricable, then for the sake of our children and our children's children, we should at least reconsider those laws.

We are bound to ask ourselves: What are the long-term effects—on society, on my community, on my family, and on myself—of forsaking the traditional discipline of ritual purity in favor of what is momentarily convenient or comfortable?

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