

AN EYE FOR AN EYE?

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Some people look down upon the Mosaic law of an ‘eye for an eye and a ‘tooth for a tooth.’ *Lex talionis* is Latin for ‘the law of revenge or retaliation.’ Yahveh gave this to carnal Israel to both limit revenge and to act as a strong deterrent against someone abusing another. If the abuser knew beforehand that he would have the same thing done to him, he would not be so quick to take the eye out of another in a fit of anger. The commandment seeks to curb abuse by inflicting the same damage to the one who caused it. God is restricting revenge to ‘an eye for an eye.’

If someone slights another, revenge says, ‘Kill him!’ This is what Lamech did:

“Then Lamech said to his wives: ‘Adah and Zillah, hear my voice! Wives of Lamech, listen to my speech! For I have killed a man for wounding me, even a young man for hurting me. If Cain shall be avenged seven times, then Lamech seventy-seven times.’” (Genesis 4:23-24)

When Yahveh instituted *lex talionis* it was to curb man’s tendency to revenge. An interesting note to this passage of Lamech is that Yeshua says we are to forgive seven times seventy if our brother comes to us and asks for forgiveness (Mt. 18:21-22). Where sin abounds, grace abounds much more (Rom. 5:20). Yeshua went on to reveal that our Father has forgiven us for innumerable offenses against Him that we could never expect ‘to pay back.’ So, we should turn around and forgive all who offend and hurt us.

With all Israel knowing the commandment of ‘an eye for an eye,’ many would curb their impulse to fight and hurt another. They wouldn’t be so quick ‘to take things into their own hands’ or be their own law. Yet, for those who did, their punishment would act as a strong deterrent to all those who heard about it, reinforcing the reason for the commandment, so that there wouldn’t be ‘revenge building upon revenge.’

An ‘eye for an eye’ wasn’t some barbaric clause that God inserted into the Law on one of His ‘off days.’ It was designed to restrain the Israeli from murdering one who had slighted him or done him real harm, or who had verbally offended him. The legislation is righteous and the translation of it, a literal ‘eye for eye,’ etc., is accurate. Over time, though, the Rabbis would alter it due to their carnal thinking and carnal compassion, which nullified the effect of the commandment. If one knows that he can murder another without having his life taken away, the power of the commandment is taken away.

‘Paying’ or making payment for the taking out of an eye, etc., is a humanistic–rabbinic interpretation that has been around for about 2,000 years, but Scripture doesn’t make any references to this ‘barter system justice’ for such things as the loss of an eye or a tooth, etc. It’s meant to be taken literally. In Dt. 25:11-12 it speaks of two men fighting, and the wife of one of the men grabs the genitals of the other man. The punishment was that her hand was to be cut off because of the possible destruction of the genitals, which speaks of procreation and manhood:

“If two men fight together, and the wife of one draws near to rescue her husband from the hand of the one attacking him, and puts out her hand and seizes him by the genitals, then you shall cut off her hand—your eye shall not pity her.” (Dt. 25:11-12)

As Scripture plainly reveals, and as Yahveh intentionally meant, if one took out the eye of another, the other had his eye taken out...not by the man who lost the eye, but by the legal system that God set up.¹ How could a loving God do this? It was instituted as an extremely strong deterrent to anyone who would

even consider taking out the eye of another. Every Israeli knew that if he damaged his neighbor in this manner (or in knocking out a tooth, etc.), *he* would have the exact same thing done to him! This is specifically seen in Exodus 21:12, 22-25, 31 (and in the case of a false witness; Dt. 19:15-21), and in Leviticus, for whomever injures another:

“If men fight and hurt a woman with child, so that she gives birth prematurely, yet no harm follows, he shall surely be punished accordingly as the woman’s husband imposes on him; and he shall pay as the judges determine, but if any harm follows, then you shall give life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe. If a man strikes the eye of his male or female servant, and destroys it, he shall let him go free for the sake of his eye. And if he knocks out the tooth of his male or female servant, he shall let him go free for the sake of his tooth.” (Exodus 21:22-27)

“Whoever murders any man shall surely be put to death. Whoever kills an animal shall make it good, animal for animal. If a man causes disfigurement of his neighbor, as he has done, so shall it be done to him—fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth; as he has caused disfigurement of a man, so shall it be done to him. And whoever kills an animal shall restore it, but whoever kills a man shall be put to death. You shall have the same law for the stranger and for one from your own country, for I am Yahveh your God.” (Leviticus 24:17-22)

“One witness shall not rise against a man concerning any iniquity or any sin that he commits; by the mouth of two or three witnesses the matter shall be established. If a false witness rises against any man to testify against him of wrongdoing, then both men in the controversy shall stand before Yahveh, before the priests and the judges who serve in those days. And the judges shall make careful inquiry, and indeed, if the witness is a false witness, who has testified falsely against his brother, then you shall do to him as he thought to have done to his brother. So *you shall put away the evil from among you. And those who remain shall hear and fear, and hereafter they shall not again commit such evil among you.* Your eye shall not pity—life shall be for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot.” (Deuteronomy 19:15-21)

To curb man’s carnal impulse for greater revenge is the reason why the loving, righteous and holy God gave it to Israel. It acted as a deterrent in two ways. One, it restrained those who would fight, from fighting. And two, if a fight broke out and one’s eye was taken out, the injured person wouldn’t take a greater revenge and murder the other fellow because he knew that he would also die. We already read about Lamech murdering a man for only wounding him and he proudly boasted about it.

In the governing of a people who had carnal and *proud* hearts, this was an effective way to control them and have a society where one wasn’t afraid to walk around. Men knew the Law before they fought and it acted as a strong deterrent to ensure societal peace. Vengeance is the Lord’s, but man loves to usurp that. Even the man who lost the eye knew that if he murdered the other man, he would be sentenced to death by the courts, so there was a strong restraint on him.

An ‘eye for an eye’ is seen in light of community justice. The judge in a court would know what to do if someone came to him and person ‘A’ did ‘so and so’ to person ‘B.’ God’s understanding is laid out in cases like this. It’s an effective way for all the community to know, beforehand, that if they did ‘such and such’ to a person, it would be done to them. When God’s Law is upheld it’s a very effective deterrent for

¹ Exodus 21:22; 22:8-9; Deuteronomy 1:16; 16:18; 19:17-18; 25:1.

restraining the carnal nature.

On the other hand, Yeshua's commandment to love our enemies differs from this in that He speaks His word to those who have His nature. His Spirit enables His followers to love our enemies:

“You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth,’ but I tell you not to resist an evil person, but whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also. If anyone wants to sue you and take away your tunic, let him also have your cloak. Whoever compels you to go one mile, go with him two. Give to him who asks you and from him who wants to borrow from you do not turn away. You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy,’ but I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven, for He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.” (Matthew 5:38-45)

This concept of Yeshua's is the logical and spiritual extension of the four great commandments found in the Torah (the Law of Moses). They are:

1. To love Yahveh, the God of Israel, with all one's heart, soul and strength (Dt. 6:4-5).
2. To love your neighbor as yourself (Lev. 19:18b).
3. To love the stranger in your midst (Lev. 19:34).
4. To love your enemy is seen in the commandment of Exodus 23:4-5:

“If you meet your enemy's ox or his donkey going astray, you must surely bring it back to him again. If you see the donkey of one who hates you lying under its burden, and you would refrain from helping it, you must surely help him with it.”

To love one's enemies means that Yeshua's love is more prominent than our carnal 'love' and desire for vengeance. It means that we have died to self (or need to die to self) and Yeshua is actually loving that enemy through us. It means that His love is greater and more powerful than Satan's evil, even in the face of death.

The concept of an 'eye for an eye' is meant for the community of God that didn't have the Holy Spirit residing within each member. It was an effective means of restraining the evil nature in man. In the Kingdom of Messiah, love and forgiveness reign supreme because believers have been given a new heart and have become partakers of His divine nature (Ezk. 36:24-27; 2nd Peter 1:14). At the crucifixion see what this new heart and divine nature mean. Yeshua forgave all who brutally crucified Him, when He could have destroyed them.

The concept of loving one's enemies is the ultimate expression of God dwelling within His people and the 'natural extension' of God's holy Law to Moses, prefigured in the first, second, third and fourth great commandments. To love your neighbor as yourself, even if your neighbor is your enemy, is a great witness for Messiah Yeshua. It's something you would want to see if you didn't know any better. You would want someone to love and forgive you, and to show you 'the better Way.'

Every day we have the divine opportunity to die to self, that Messiah's love and forgiveness might be seen in this world of darkness. He is certainly worthy of our life.²

² Revised on 17 May 2016.