

Likewise, the Sages taught the same thing regarding simply saying “yes” and “no” as a valid oath:

“Let your nay and yea be both *zedek*.” (b.*Bava Metzia* 49a)

R. Huna said, “The yea of the righteous is a yea; their no is a no.” (Mid Rab *Ruth* vii. §6, on 3.18)

According to *Mechilta*, the Israelites answered “Yea, yea and nay, nay to the commands at Sinai” (*Mechilta* on Exodus, 20:1, 2).

Thus, while not prohibiting vows or oaths altogether, Yeshua does bring us back to the very import and message of the Torah, namely, that our words should be fully spoken in truth and with integrity. James reiterates the essence of our Master’s teaching:

But above all, my brethren, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or with any other oath; but your yes is to be yes, and your no, no, so that you may not fall under judgment. (James 5:12)

It seems apparent that Yeshua’s words here were understood by His Apostles as we have construed them, that is, not as prohibiting oaths altogether, but requiring that His disciples make simple vows with full intention of fulfilling them. Thus, Paul himself took a Nazirite vow (Acts 18:18), and he helped four men complete their vow in Jerusalem (Acts 21:23) which would have required the taking of a vow. Likewise, Paul uses oath formulae in Rom 1:9; 2Cor 1:23; Gal 1:20; Phil 1:8, and the angel of John’s Apocalypse swears “by the God of heaven” (Rev 10:6). Once again, the antithesis that Yeshua gives us is between a superficial adherence to Torah commandments for the sake of men, and obedience from the heart that longs to please the Almighty Himself.

38–39 You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you, do not resist an evil person; but whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also.

The law of *lex talionis* (law of retaliation) is found in Ex 21:25; Lev 24:19ff, and Deut 19:21. The Sages have always understood the application of the *lex talionis* of the Torah to be in the sense of equivalence, that is, equivalent payment equal to the evaluation of the loss. The idea of physical mutilation as a means of lawful punishment has no example in the Scriptures, except for the penalty for a woman who injures a man’s private parts—her hand is to be cut off (Deut 25:11–12). However, the Sages interpret this as they do *lex talionis*, and understand the penalty to be the equivalent value of a hand. The only example we find is during warfare, when the soldiers of Israel defeated Adoni-Bezek, and cut off his thumbs and big-toes (Judges 1:6). But this is not a penalty of justice *per se* but a humbling of a defeated enemy in war.

In our context, however, Yeshua quotes a representative line from the *lex talionis* but places it in the context, not of physical injury but of public humiliation. For a slap on the cheek is not an injury to the body but to one’s soul and sense of personal dignity. Some have suggested that the idea of the “right cheek” would mean that a right handed person doing the striking

would do so with the back of the hand, giving an even greater sense of public humiliation. As we shall see, the Mishnah considers a back-handed slap of even greater consequences.

The Mishnah gives five areas where damages may be lawfully sought:

He who injures his fellow is liable to [compensate] him on five counts: (1) injury, (2) pain, (3) medical costs, (4) loss of income [lit.: loss of time], and (5) indignity. (m.*BavaQama* 8.1)

It is to the fifth category that Yeshua makes reference, and the Mishnah uses His same analogy:

He who boxes the ear of his fellow pays him a *sela*. R. Judah says in the name of R. Yose the Galilean, "A *maneh*." [If] he smacked him, he pays him two hundred *zuz*. [If] it is with the back of his hand, he pays him four hundred *zuz*. (m.*BavaQama* 8.6)

A *maneh* was equivalent to 25 *selas* and 100 *zuz*. To give an idea of these evaluations, a pair of oxen for plowing could cost 200 *zuz* (m.*BavaBatra* 5.1). It can be seen, then, that public humiliation, if pressed, could be quite expensive, for a back-handed slap could cost one the equivalent of two pair of oxen.

It may well be in the context of these legal penalties for public insult that Yeshua gives His teaching. It is not as though He diminishes the grave results of public insult, but His method of dealing with it is not to seek monetary payment, but rather to combat such insult with humility. One is not to "resist an evil person," which in this context must mean "one is not to retaliate with equivalent insults." Moreover, to "turn the other cheek" means to allow additional insults to go unchallenged. It is not through hauling the insulter into court and demanding payment, but through a humble and gracious spirit that the one insulted will be seen as righteous. Nothing illustrates this more than the example of Yeshua Himself:

For you have been called for this purpose, since Messiah also suffered for you, leaving you an example for you to follow in His steps, who committed no sin, nor was any deceit found in His mouth; and while being reviled, He did not revile in return; while suffering, He uttered no threats, but kept entrusting Himself to Him who judges righteously. (1Pet 2:21-23)

Understood in this way, the teaching of our Master is not in reference to bodily injury, or to someone attacking another person to inflict bodily harm. He is dealing rather with the wounds of public defamation and teaches us that humility, not returning insult for insult, and allowing the Almighty to deal with the one who has tried to inflict public insult, is the way of righteousness.

Some of the Sages taught the same thing:

Has it not been taught: Concerning those who are insulted but do not insult others [in revenge], who hear themselves reproached without replying, who [perform good] work out of love of the Lord and rejoice in their sufferings, Scripture says: But they that love Him will be as the sun when he goes forth in his might? (Judges 5:31) — [That means,] indeed, that he keeps it in his heart [though without taking

action]. But Raba said: He who passes over his retaliations has all his transgressions passed over. — [That speaks of the case] that an endeavour was made to obtain his reconciliation, and his consent is obtained. (b.Yoma 23a)

If you are struck you must forgive the offender even though he does not ask for your forgiveness. (t.BavaQama 9.29)

Likewise, in the Daily Prayers we recite:

My God, guard my tongue from evil and my lips from speaking deceitfully. To those who curse me, may my soul be unresponsive; and let my soul be like dust to all. (*The Complete Metsuda Siddur*, p. 140)

40–42 If anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, let him have your coat also. Whoever forces you to go one mile, go with him two. Give to him who asks of you, and do not turn away from him who wants to borrow from you.

In the Luke parallel (6:29–30), the wording is somewhat different:

Whoever hits you on the cheek, offer him the other also; and whoever takes away your coat, do not withhold your shirt from him either. Give to everyone who asks of you, and whoever takes away what is yours, do not demand it back.

Some have understood the idea of “take away” to mean “rob” or “steal” but the verb (αἶρω, *airo*) does not generally have this sense. So Luke is not suggesting that when someone robs a person of something, he is obligated to offer him other things as well. Luke’s “takes away” is probably equivalent to Matthew’s picture of taking one’s shirt as legal compensation in a lawsuit.

We should recognize that these verses continue in the same context already established, that is, Yeshua’s call for humility and forbearance on the part of His disciples. Someone who takes a person to court must be presumed to have a valid claim. In the illustration given by our Master, the plaintiff sues for compensation, and the defendant is portrayed as very poor, since the clothes on his back are his only valuable possessions. Rather than seeking some legal loopholes, or counter-suit, the one who knows that a claimant has a valid case against him should fully comply and seek to make full restitution, even if it means giving up what might be rightfully retained. For the inner garment (the “shirt”) was not protected under Torah law, but the outer tunic may have been (Ex 22:26–27, though in this case, the tunic is taken as security, not debt recovery). Thus, in a willingness to make full restitution where a debt is owed, the poor person will be seen as righteous and in such willing compliance, may receive mercy.

The second illustration is that of forced travel. In 1st Century Roman society, a Roman soldier had the authority to require any common person to assist him in his travels, especially to carry his equipment. Apparently such a requirement could only be extended for a mile (the Greek μίλον, *milon* was about 20% shorter than our modern mile). Yeshua, however, requires that His disciples give double the request.

It is natural to suppose that Matt 1:41 is concerned with the situation

which would arise if a Jewish civilian is impressed as baggage-carrier by a Roman soldier of the army of occupation. If the victim is a follower of Jesus, he will give double what is demanded. The first mile renders to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, the second mile, by meeting oppression with kindness, renders to God the things that are God's. (Manson, *Sayings*, p. 160, quoted from Lachs, *Rabbinic Commentary*, p. 105)

Our Lord's instructions on this topic are concluded with His requirement that His disciples be gracious and giving. His words are in the form of a parallelism, so that He is not talking about two things, i.e., being gracious and willing to loan to someone who asks to borrow. Rather, the two are speaking of the same thing, that is, a generous spirit that considers God to be the supplier of all one's needs. Interestingly, a discussion on "revenge" and "bearing a grudge" in the rabbinic materials also incorporates the idea of loaning to someone who asks:

What is revenge and what is bearing a grudge? If one said to his fellow: 'Lend me your sickle', and he replied 'No', and to-morrow the second comes [to the first] and says: 'Lend me your axe!' and he replies: 'I will not lend it to you, just as you would not lend me your sickle' — that is revenge. And what is bearing a grudge? If one says to his fellow: 'Lend me your axe', he replies 'No', and on the morrow the second asks: 'Lend me your garment', and he answers: 'Here it is. I am not like you who would not lend me [what I asked for]' — that is bearing a grudge. (b.Yoma 23a)

In the same way, Yeshua teaches us that a humble heart is also a heart willing to give to others who are in need.

Surely His teaching does not stand against the rightful establishment of just laws, nor do His words set aside the rights of personal ownership. But His teaching is predicated upon the belief that the Father is the One Who supplies our needs, and we therefore retain a "loose grasp" upon our material possessions in the sense that it is not difficult for us to let others use what we have when we see them in need.

43 You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.'

Once again, Yeshua is teaching the manner in which His disciples were to exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees (v. 20) by applying to their lives the Torah as understood within the context of its original intent and spiritual import. This verse and the following are structured in a way to emphasize how the prevailing interpretation of a key Torah text (Lev 19:18) was to be corrected in line with the spirit of the Torah as God's instructions in righteousness, not as a means of cultural and ethnic identity. The Torah does not set up boundaries between people groups, but between what is righteous and what is unrighteous.

The structure of this final antithesis may be outlined as follows:

1. *Prevailing teaching*: love your neighbor and hate your en-