



Ask The Rabbi

Researched at Ohr Somayach, Jerusalem

This Issue Contains:

1. For Eyes
2. Yiddle Riddle



Barbara Beran of Rockville, Maryland <beran@bellatlantic.net> wrote:

Dear Rabbi,

Please explain why it is said that 'an eye for an eye' refers to monetary recompense for an injury. I have heard that it has something to do with the letter ayin - but I do not know the link.

Dear Barbara Beran,

The phrase 'an eye for an eye' is one of the most well known yet misunderstood in the entire Torah.

Obviously, an eye is of inestimable value. You can never replace it or put a price on it. Certainly, blinding the offender will do nothing to help the victim.

However, an eye does indeed have a monetary aspect to it. Let's say, for example, that the victim is a football player who earns a million dollars a year. After losing an eye, he can no longer play big-league ball. His best job prospect is coaching a minor-league team, which pays an average salary. Losing his eye cost him millions of dollars in actual financial loss.

This financial loss is what the Torah refers to when it says "an eye to replace an eye." The eye can't be replaced, but at least the victim can reclaim the financial loss caused by the loss of his eye.

In addition to the financial value, the Torah requires four types of punitive damages: The offender must recompense the victim for pain, embarrassment, unemployment, and medical expenses.

But how do we know that 'an eye for an eye' is not literal? First of all, 'an eye for an eye' is a bad translation. The correct translation is 'an eye to replace an eye.' The word 'replace' connotes payment rather than revenge.

But to understand any verse properly, you need to look at the context.

The verses before and after this verse describe someone who accidentally kills another person's animal: "Whoever kills an animal must pay for it — a soul to replace a soul." (Leviticus 24:18) Obviously, the term "a soul to replace a soul" means payment. We don't kill the person, or his animal, because he killed an animal! It says explicitly 'he must pay for it.' Therefore, it's logical that 'an eye to replace an eye' also means payment. To say otherwise is to take the verse out of context.

Furthermore, if the verse were literal, what would happen if a blind person poked out someone's eye? Would he be exempt? And what if a person with only one eye poked the eye of someone with two eyes, or the other way around?

Above all, taking out someone's eye is dangerous and could easily cause his death. Would the Torah require that an offender be put at risk of death, especially in the case where his offense was accidental?

Probably the strongest indication that this verse is not literal is the very fact the Jewish people say so. Our tradition is a faithful, unbroken chain dating back to Sinai. (The evidence for this is a topic for another discussion.) In all Jewish history there is absolutely no record of this verse ever having been implemented literally. The very idea is abhorrent to any Jew.

The Vilna Gaon discovered an ingenious clue, hinting that "an eye to replace an eye" refers to paying money. Very literally, the verse reads 'an eye **under** an eye.' Take the three letters 'under' the three letters of the word 'eye' in the Hebrew alphabet. They spell 'kesef' — money! [Eye in Hebrew is 'ayin' — spelled 'ayin yud nun.' The letters immediately after ('under') each of these letters are 'Feh Kaf Samech.' ('Peh' and 'Feh' are the same in the Torah.) These letters spell 'kesef' — money!]

Sources:

- Leviticus 24:18-21
- Talmud, Tractate Baba Kama 83b
- Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, Exodus 23

Yiddle Riddle

Judith Subar <abubbe@aol.com> wrote:

We were at our synagogue dinner and someone asked the following Yiddle Riddle: What blessing can't you say if you are on the moon?

Answer next week...

If you have E-Mail and a question, you can submit it to Ask The Rabbi for possible inclusion in a future edition. Just write your question using your E-Mail program, set the subject to "Ask The Rabbi" and send it to ohr@virtual.co.il. Or use our form at <http://www.ohr.org.il/ask/page/ask.htm>. We can't include all questions submitted, but we do try to respond to everyone.

Ask The Rabbi is written by Rabbi Moshe Lazerus, Rabbi Reuven Lauffer, Rabbi Reuven Subar, Rabbi Avrohom

General Editor: **Rabbi Moshe Newman**

Lefkowitz, Rabbi Mordechai Becher and other Rabbis at Ohr Somayach Institutions / Tanenbaum College, Jerusalem, Israel.

Production Design: **Lev Seltzer**

Ask The Rabbi • World Wide Web: Our address is <http://www.ohr.org.il>

is available from • Fax and Mail in Israel and US-MAIL in America. Send us a note requesting a subscription in Israel, or call 800-431-2272 in the US for details.

several sources: • E-Mail via InterNet. To subscribe, send the message "sub ask (your full name)" to listproc@virtual.co.il

☎ 22 Shimon Hatzadik Street, POB 18103, Jerusalem Israel

☎ 972-2-581-0315

☎ 972-2-581-2890

☎ ohr@virtual.co.il

☎ 38 East 29th Street 8th floor, New York, NY 10016, USA

☎ 1-212-213-3100

☎ 1-212-213-8717

☎ RZCorlin@aol.com or estern@Aol.com

☎ 613 Clark Avenue West, Thornhill, Ontario L4J 5V3, Canada

☎ 1-905-886-5730

☎ 1-905-886-6065

☎ Somayach@MSN.com

©1997 Ohr Somayach International - All rights reserved

Dedication opportunities are available for Ask The Rabbi — Please contact us for details

Issue #1541 - 21 June 1997 - Beha'lotcha

This publication contains words of Torah. Please treat it with due respect. Do not let this land on a garbage heap.