



## 5 ways to right a wrong

This week's Torah reflection with the sages can spark a lively discussion of how we respond in situations where injury has occurred. If you were to name five constructive, healing responses (steps that you would want your children to learn as they meet life's painful moments), what would they be? Here are five to start the discussion...

**1. Acknowledge** the damage. Obviously this applies to the damage inflicted on the person who has been harmed. It is possible, too, for the victim to acknowledge the pain the offender has brought upon him/herself.

**2. Own** up to your actions which contributed to the painful situation. We can't control the decisions of others in this regard, but we can take care of 'our side of the street.'

**3. Repair** the damage through all practical means available. Acknowledge what can't be repaired.

**4. Repent** of wrongdoing in a manner which can be appreciated by the injured party. Repenting 'in your heart' alone may not be enough. A sign of sorrow visible to the injured party and the community may be required. (Note: both Judaism and Christianity have ritual forms of public confession of sin.)

**5. Forgive** yourself and others. Forgiveness is ultimately liberating as we let go of negative traits such as hatred and self-pity that oppress the human spirit. Forgiveness may not be possible all at once; but we can take small steps, one at a time.



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[www.lightoftorah.net](http://www.lightoftorah.net)

Text: Teresa Pirola  
Design: Sarann Ryan  
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# Light of Torah

Ancient texts, through fresh eyes, alive for today.



Leviticus 21:1—24:23

*Emor: 'say'*

## Why reflect on Torah?

In this week's Torah portion from the Book of Leviticus we read:

*"If anyone maims another [person]: what was done shall be done in return—fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth" (Leviticus 24:19-20).*

The 'eye for an eye' verse is surely one of the most widely known biblical verses, and also the most misunderstood. It conjures up horrific pictures of eyes being gouged and limbs severed in pursuit of a distorted, inhumane justice. Tragically, in Christian history this verse has often become a preaching mechanism for depicting Judaism as a 'vengeful' religion in contrast to the gospel of love preached by Christianity.

In its teachings since the Second Vatican Council the Church has warned against such stereotypes which misrepresent the Jewish understanding of its own sacred texts. *Light of Torah* is a tool to assist this educative process among parish audiences. By looking at Torah through the eyes of the Jewish sages, we learn how Judaism has interpreted even difficult and obscure texts in ways congruent with an understanding of a loving God.



## Torah Portion

From the Jewish calendar  
of Torah readings:

### Leviticus 21:1—24:23

Our Torah portion this week includes the famous verse ‘eye for eye, tooth for tooth.’ In ancient Israelite culture was this once taken literally as a physically inflicted punishment? Historically we can’t be sure, but what we do know is that from very early post-biblical times, rabbinic opinion interpreted this verse as referring to monetary compensation, not physical retaliation.

Read page 1 of this leaflet (‘Why Reflect on Torah’), before turning to a close reading of Leviticus 24:17-22. Then let’s explore some of the reasoning of the sages for a non-literal interpretation of ‘eye for eye.’

## Tasting Torah

“...fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth” (Leviticus 24:20).

A number of rabbinic voices in the Talmud consider a literal interpretation of this verse to be impractical. For “*if a blind man blinded another...how would I be able to give an eye for an eye literally? Yet the Torah states (Lev. 24:22): one law shall there be for you.*” [Bava Kamma 83b-84a]

## Touching Torah

Ibn Ezra [12th C.] points out that physical punishment is not feasible because it can never be exact. “*For if a man deprived his fellow of a third of his normal sight by his blow, how can the retaliatory blow be so calculated as to have the same results?*” It may blind the offender completely, it might even result in his death. Punishment would not fit the crime.

A further practical issue is raised by the *Kuzari* [1]: compensatory money is actually useful to the victim, whereas “*you will gain nothing by cutting off [the offender’s] hand.*”

Other sages argue their case directly from scripture. For example, Maimonides [12th C.] notes how in Exodus we read that if one party is physically injured in a quarrel “*the assailant shall go unpunished— except for paying of the idleness [i.e. time lost] and the cure*” (21:18-19). If monetary compensation is intended here, why would it be any different in Leviticus?

## Depthing Torah

We may query, as did *Maharal* of Prague [16th C.]: if monetary compensation is intended by the ‘eye for eye’ verse, why doesn’t the text say it outright? Maimonides replies that there is a fundamental difference between injuring the body of a human being and harming his property. While money can fix the latter, it can never totally compensate for the former. The severity of the ‘eye for eye’ language is there to remind the offender of this fact, that really he *deserves* to be maimed in return, but this is not the Jewish way of settling disputes. Ultimately, a humane resolution to the whole tragic situation is only possible through real remorse on the part of the offender and forgiveness by the victim. Says Maimonides:

*“It is forbidden for the injured party to be cruel and unforgiving. This is not the Jewish way, but as soon as the guilty party has sought his forgiveness and made supplication once or twice, and he knows that the smiter sincerely regrets his action, he should forgive him.”*

Note the deft interpretative manoeuvres of the sages. What began as a verse that sounds like a license for revenge gives rise to teachings about restraint, remorse and forgiveness.

## Doing Torah

Where do you find yourself within the sages’ discussion? In what way does your own life experience of injury, reconciliation and reparation inform your reflections?



## Faith & life

Maimonides’ view reminds us of media reports of victims maimed in road accidents by negligent drivers. The courts may award damages, yet clearly so much more is required. At times we see visible signs of that ‘more’: heartfelt sorrow in offenders, compassion and forgiveness from victims and their families. Other times we see only pain and anger.

[1] A treatise in defence of Judaism by Spanish scholar and poet Judah HaLevi (1075-1141).

Bibliography: Friedman, *Commentary on the Torah* (San Francisco, 2001); Leibowitz, *New Studies in Vayikra*, Vol 2 (NY, 1996), 494-508. Scripture: NJPS.