

2019 CMTL DVAR TORAH SNAPSHOTS

From: *May You Cheer When Your Enemies are Punished for Cheering When You Were Punished?*

A healthy Torah polity is one in which people's very different opinions and emotions create a dynamic equilibrium that inhibits extremism but enables creativity.

From: *Yitro and Amalek at the Border*

There are many things we know we ought to do, and even desperately want to do, and yet find ourselves not doing because they make us vulnerable to rejection.

From: *Ordination and Subordination*

Communal *avadim* do not necessarily have more autonomy than private *avadim*, and communities can abuse their power just as individuals can.

From: *2019 Annual Essay on Commandedness in memory of Matt Eisenfeld*

Understanding and explicating the concept of commandedness, and the associated concept of heteronomy, should be a core task of contemporary Orthodox thought.

From: *Was Making the Golden Calf a Violation of Halakhah?*

Whether a person is capable of turning down opportunities to express their zealotry against fellow humans may be a useful metric of whether they are capable of making positive contributions to religious society.

From: *They Might Be Giants*

Superhuman greatness is a disproportion or even distortion, and allegedly superhuman role models are distractions rather than inspirations.

From: *The Persistence of Memory: Sacrifice, Human Sacrifice, and Amalek*

When violence is given no controlled religious outlet, sanctified violence often finds far more dangerous expressions.

From: *The Fire Last Time, and Almost Every Time*

Religion needs the yetzer hora of ambition, as it needs every other human drive. Otherwise Torah becomes disconnected from society, and thereby from justice.

From: *Where There's a Priestly Will, Is There a Halakhic Way?*

Only a relationship characterized by loyalty, integrity, and rigor can grant texts any degree of actual influence and genuine independence.

From: *Should Moral Intuition and Halakhah Always Agree?*

Specifically in times of great moral ferment, when it is obvious that even the most strongly and broadly held human intuitions (whether correct or incorrect) are often the product of socially contingent factors, one of the attractions and advantages of halakhah is that it provides an Archimedean point for values, a fixed polestar we can follow when everything else seems mutable, fleeting, and invented.

From: Can Halakhah Be a Desecration of Hashem's Name?

Openness to moral critique must not be either the result or the cause of a lack of overall moral confidence in the system. But shutting ourselves off from moral critique carries equally serious risks.

From: Is Our Covenant with G-d Egalitarian?

Human beings cannot **directly** withdraw from a covenant with G-d. However, we can create a situation in which G-d has the **legitimate** option of withdrawing Himself, which would indirectly release us as well.

From: Imagining Divine Empathy

One arc of the Torah's narrative is how G-d comes to terms with the ways in which our relationship with Him, as understood by the rest of humanity, limits the extent to which the Attribute of Justice can be expressed in this world relative to the Attribute of Mercy.

From: Monotheism, Matnat Chinam, and Mentchlichkeit

We prefer to err on the side of humanity rather than on pitilessness, when we don't know which one halakhah requires of us.

From: Dignity and Charity

We have the right to prioritize ourselves, and the formerly rich have a legitimate interest in preserving their social status, but we must never deny someone else **for the sake** of preserving our superiority over them.

From: Why We Need More Akeidah Conversations

We need to engage moral critiques of halakhah, in the context of vigorous internal Torah conversations.

From: Can One Ever Really Ask an Eved for a Favor?

Faith in Torah compels the belief that there is a morally acceptable way of reading the Torah's narratives. It does not guarantee that we will find that reading.

From: Thanksgiving, Jewish Identity, and Antisemitism

Jewish identity can thrive without being rooted in the expectation of oppression.

From: Love, Power, and Religion

Telling someone you love them gives them power over you; they know that you are dependent on their affection. So telling someone you love them paradoxically makes it impossible to know with certainty that they truly love you.

From: The Challenge of Unexpected Kindness: Torah and the American Jewish Experience

With regard to anti-Semitism, we still live in among the best of times, and in among the best of places. What has properly changed is our increased awareness that this condition is fragile, and that its continuation cannot be taken for granted.