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Life for Life, Eye for Eye

19: 15-21

Life for life, eye for eye DIG: How many witnesses would it normally take to make a case against someone in Isra'el? Then why the need for this mitzvah? What did the accuser and the accused have to do? Why would that be a deterrent? What was the principle behind this mitzvah?

REFLECT: What impact does bearing false witness have on your life with God, self, and others? Do you think that the adoption of a remotely comparable law in relation to perjury would have a beneficial effect on the truthfulness of witnesses in modern courts?

The principle of a life for a life, an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, a hand for a hand, and a foot for a foot, was to limit violence and vengeance, and to guarantee justice.

Deuteronomy 19:1 to 26:15 (to see link click [DI](#) - The Social and Mitzvot) deals with individual mitzvot, and to today's readers they might appear irrelevant at first, but the very principles behind these commandments were the ones that have brought dignity to mankind. We need to examine these mitzvot in depth to discover the spirit in which they were given, so that we can still live in obedience to **God's Word** today. For example, in **Numbers 18**, the **Israelites** were to bring **their tithes** to the Tabernacle because **the priests** and **Levites** had **no inheritance**. But today we have no Temple and no priesthood; however, we bring our tithes to our place of worship. That is the spirit of the mitzvah.

Every system of justice depends on people knowing the truth and speaking the truth. To bear false **witness** is to break **God's** mitzvah (see [Bt](#) - **Do Not Give False Testimony**) and to undermine the foundation of the legal system. The person who swears to tell the truth and then tells lies is committing perjury, which itself is a serious crime. The Jewish mitzvah required **two or three witnesses** to establish the guilt of an accused person: **By the word of two or three witnesses is a case to be established (Deuteronomy 19:15 and 17:6; Numbers 35:30).**

And both **Yeshua (Matthew 18:16)**, and **Paul (Second Corinthians 13:1; First Timothy 5:19)** applied this principle to discipline in the local congregation.

But inevitably, however, some cases would have only **one witness**, even though the Torah said that **a single witness shall not rise up against a person for any offense or sin that he commits**. But **suppose a hostile witness rises up against someone to accuse him of wrongdoing (19:16)**. What then? At that point the accused and **the single witness** would have to go to Jerusalem, to the Sanctuary and present their cases to **the priests** and **judges** there (see [Dg - Judges](#)). Then investigation became extremely important. Having to go to **the priestly** court would be deterrent enough, for **ADONAI** could convey **His** truth to **the priests** and **judges** and expose the wickedness of the accuser. But knowing that they might receive the punishment they wanted for the accused would also make them hesitate, especially if it was a capital crime. **Then both people who have the dispute will stand before ADONAI, before the cohanim and judges in charge at that time (19:17)**. Notice that this case was not heard at the gate of the city anymore, but was heard in Jerusalem (see the commentary on [The Life of Christ Lg - The Great Sanhedrin](#)). It was a difficult case . . . it was **one witness**.⁴²⁷

The judges are to investigate thoroughly, and if indeed the witness is a false witness and has testified falsely against his brother, then you are to do to him just as he had plotted to do to his brother. The false witness would be punished with the same penalty the accused would have borne. The equitable punishment of the lying witness was necessary for **God's** covenantal nation **to purge the evil from your midst (19:18-19)**. This phrase is heard many times in the study of **the Torah**, one that is repeated seven times from **Chapters 13 to 24, "You will purge the evil from your midst" (13:6, 17:7, 19:19, 21:21, 22:21, 22:24, 24:7)**.

It was essential that **the** adjudicating **priests** and **judges** obeyed this mitzvah for the sake of the covenantal nation. **Those who remain will hear and be afraid, and they will no longer do such an evil thing as this in your midst (19:20)**. The appropriate punishment of **the** lying **witness** would have a deterrent effect that would prevent widespread bearing false testimony. Rather than succumb to feelings of compassion for **the false witness** caught up in a web of destructive lies, **the priests** and **judges** must show **the liar no pity** whatsoever. Instead, **their** judgment must agree with the principle of *lex talionis*.⁴²⁸

Moses closed this section by reminding the people that in every case, the punishment must fit the crime. This is known as the *lex talionis*, which is Latin for *the law of retaliation*. Some people today call this principle barbaric, probably because they don't understand what it means: *the sentence must be neither too strict nor too easy but must be suited to what the law demands and what the convicted criminal deserves*. Honest judges don't give a murderer the same sentence they give the man who poisoned his neighbor's cat, nor is shoplifting given the same punishment as a kidnapper. The judicial principle spoken of here emphasized fairness and humane treatment at a time in history when punishments were terribly brutal.⁴²⁹



Your eye must not show pity: life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot (19:21). At first reading, some might think this was ancient and unfair. But the spirit of this commandment is completely the opposite. You see at that time if one man from a tribe would fight with a man from another tribe, the guy who got beaten up would bring in his brothers. Then that guy would retaliate and it would become a tribal war. **God said: life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot.** So, the retribution would be limited to one person. And the person taking revenge was not carried out by anyone involved in the dispute, but Jewish officials in Jerusalem after a thorough investigation. Far from encouraging vengeance, this mitzvah limited vengeance and helped the judge to come to a fair judgment about the crime.⁴³⁰

ADONAI says: Vengeance is Mine (Deuteronomy 32:35a; Romans 12:19; Hebrews 10:30). One was not allowed to take the law into his own hands,

otherwise anarchy would follow. This is the principle behind this verse. At that time, you had the code of Hammurabi, and others, where the punishment far exceeded the crime. **The eye for eye** concept was meant to have the punishment fit the crime. No more, no less. The Torah highlighted the idea that mankind was created in the image of **God**. All of this was to discourage false witnesses.⁴³¹

*Dear holy and just Heavenly **Father**, all praise to **You** for being such a pure and holy **God**. **You** are not a god who closes **His** eyes to wrong. Nor do you ignore wrong. **You** make just and fair rules for stopping wrongs, by fairly punishing the wicked person.*

*Yet to **Your** glory, **You** are also full of love, mercy and **grace**. **In love he predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will - to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and understanding (Ephesians 1:4c-8 NIV)**. Praise **You** for being so wonderful! I look forward to adoring and praising **You** for all eternity in heaven! In **Yeshua's** holy name and power of **His** resurrection. Amen*