

Q:

I periodically hear the verse in Leviticus quoted – “An eye for an eye” - and the assertion that the Bible is a book of vengeance (and the assumption that Judaism is too). I have heard it said even more frequently during the current Israel/Gaza war. Do we still adhere to it?

A:

Unfortunately, this verse (from Exodus 21:24) is the one that those not at all familiar with the Bible seem to know the most, while if they also know “Love your neighbour as yourself,” they see it as being said by Jesus and do not realise he was quoting it from the book of Leviticus, which is where it first appears (19:18).

To be very honest, originally, it may have

meant a literal reciprocal punishment, though we have no record of it being carried out, and it is also possible it was used as a dire warning in a society where there was no police force or prison.

However, by the time of the Mishnah (the rabbinic commentary on the Bible in the 2nd century and the next surviving Jewish text after the Bible), it had already been legislated away and may have been discarded much earlier than that.

The rabbis realised that if it was carried out – and the penalty for damaging someone’s eye was that the perpetrator lost his eye too – then the result would be a lot of one-eyed people. But they felt they could not simply abolish a biblical command, so they interpreted it away and read it as “an eye’s worth for an eye,” and they ruled that instead of physical retribution, it meant financial compensation.

Thus, the perpetrator had to pay the

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victim compensation for the pain he endured, the medical cost, the time off work, and the public embarrassment.

That may sound

very modern, but it dates to some 2,000 years ago.

However, those who read the bare biblical text, or who just hear the phrase

“an eye for an eye,” never realise this is a long-standing re-evaluation / revision and still assume we take the verse literally.

Q:

How does one safely wash a tallit so as to ensure it is not damaged? The internet tells me not to put it in the washing machine and suggests dry cleaning might be too risky unless using a Jewish dry cleaner. What do you do?

A:

If it is a silk tallit (the Sephardi type), then an ordinary dry clean-

er should be fine and they do not have to be Jewish. They just need to know how to treat different materials. If it is a woollen one (the Ashkenazi type), a washing machine will do fine

(which is what I do); then just air it well in the garden or on the balcony, depending on what you have.

As you might expect me to say, the best type of tallit is one worn often!