

AVODAH: The Jewish Service Corps
Torah Portion – Balak

Boil It Down For Me

הַגִּיד לְךָ אֲדָם מִה־טוֹב וּמִה־יְהוָה דּוֹרֵשׁ מִמֶּךָ
כִּי אִם־עֲשׂוֹת מִשְׁפָּט וְאַהֲבַת הַחֶסֶד וְהִצְנַעְלֻכֶת עִם־אֱלֹהֶיךָ:

God has told you, o mortal, what is good:

Only to do justice, and to love goodness, and to walk modestly with your God. [Micah 6:8]

These words from the book of Micah are understood by the rabbis to be a kind of condensed presentation of Jewish teachings:

Rabbi Simlai taught: 613 commandments were given to Moses, 356 "thou shalt nots," equal to the number of days in the solar year, and 248 "thou shalt," corresponding to the parts of the body...David came and boiled them down to 11, as it is written:

Lord, who shall dwell in your sanctuary?...One who lives without blame, who does what is right and in his heart acknowledges the truth; whose tongue is not given to evil, who has never done harm to his fellow or borne reproach for his acts towards his neighbor; for whom a contemptible man is abhorrent, but who honors those who revere God; who stands by his word even when it hurts; who has never lent money at interest or accepted a bribe against the innocent. (Psalms 15:1-5)

Isaiah came and boiled them down to six, as it is written:

One who does what is right, speaks what is true, spurns profit from fraudulent dealings, waves away a bribe instead of grasping at it, stops his ears against listening to infamy, shuts his eyes against looking at evil... (Isaiah 33:15)

Micah came and boiled them down to three, as it is written:

God has told you, O Man, what is good, and what the Lord requires of you: Only to do justice, and to love goodness, and to walk modestly with your God. (Micah 6:8)

Isaiah came again and boiled them down into two, as it is written:

Thus says the Lord: Observe what is right and do what is just. (Isaiah 56:1)

Amos came and boiled them down to one, as it is written:

For thus says the Lord to the House of Israel: Seek Me and live. (Amos 5:4)

[Makot 23b-24a]

QUESTION: In all of these “condensed versions” of Judaism, what is the role of pursuing social justice versus, say, ritual observance or Torah study? How does the final suggestion by Amos connect to ones before it?