

A Thought for Shabbat

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Shabbat Shalom

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This week's Torah portion, *Vaera*, begins the punishment of Pharaoh by way of the plagues. Such a portion brings the issue of punishment in general to mind.

When I was in elementary school, our principal would often take a paddle to a child who had misbehaved. No one seemed to even bat an eye when this would take place. Today if that happened, Child Protective Services would be called (and should be called). The idea of punishment has changed over the years.

Is there a place for punishment in our society? Well certainly...Judaism is a consequential religion in which there are rewards and punishments – some of biblical proportions and others of smaller proportions. Often times in Confirmation class I will ask the students why they would choose not to do something and they answer, "We might get caught." Fear of punishment is a strong force in the minds of humans.

What of punishment after the crime or sin has been committed? How do we determine if the punishment fits the crime or whether it is cruel and unusual? Is the parent the best one to determine the punishment for a child? With young people, I ask them to determine their own punishment – for then it has meaning. It is also usually harsher than the punishment I might determine appropriate. What about for a criminal? Is it a judge, a legislature or a jury who determines what is a fair punishment? Is it God? The questions regarding punishment could take thousands of pages and the idea of punishment in Judaism has theological ramifications beyond the scope of this Thought For Shabbat. Suffice to say, punishment has its place and it ought to prevent a negative act or discipline for an act committed and that punishment ought to be fair. As Talmud teaches, "all the measures [of punishment and reward] taken ...are in accordance with the principle of measure for measure."