

# Walking in the Dust of Rabbi Jesus

## Chapter 10: Thinking with Both Hands

1. In this chapter, Tverberg explores Jewish ideas regarding prioritizing laws. Aware that sometimes obligation to the law will result in conflicting demands, she says, “[the Jews] described the laws in terms of being 'light' (*kal*) and 'heavy' (*hamur*). This came out of an effort to live by God's laws in all situations, rather than arbitrarily ignoring some and doing others” (134-5). She articulates these guidelines for weighing the laws:

- ***pikuach nephesh*** (“the preservation of life”): “The sages recognized the preeminent importance that the Torah placed on human life, far more than in other law codes (see Deut 30:16)... all laws (except [murder, idolatry and sexual immorality]) should be set aside to save a human life.” For example, Jesus healed a man on the Sabbath, saying, “I ask you, which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to destroy it?” (Lk 6:9).
- ***tza'ar baalei hayim*** (“preventing suffering to living things”): This guideline recognizes the numerous laws meant to prevent suffering, e.g. don't muzzle an ox threshing grain (Deut 25:9); send away the mother bird before raiding the nest (Deut 22:6-7); don't eat the flesh cut from a living animal (Gen 9:4). Jesus healed on the Sabbath a woman with a chronic condition, not because it couldn't wait, but to spare her further suffering (Lk 13:14).

Tverberg further points out that this “weighing” can't be used to let us off the hook, quoting Jesus' statement in Matt 5 that anyone who breaks the least of these commandments will be called least in the kingdom of heaven. One might add to the list of principles Paul's guidance from the meat-sacrificed-to-idol passages that a more mature Christian should defer to a younger on matters of conscience lest his or her exercise of license become a stumbling block. Jesus' quotation of the Lord in Hos 6:6 is also relevant: “I desire mercy, not sacrifice” (Mt 12:7).

2. Which laws are held as the most weighty by a given group is revealed by the things they are willing to go to the mat for, through lobbying, internal social pressure, or other means. For instance, among Quakers and Mennonites, nonviolence is considered paramount. Which are considered the weightiest laws by the following groups: Amish, Baptists, Catholics, mainline Protestants, Reformed Christians, and evangelicals?
3. Jews are unique for their perdurance; few cultures can be said to have persisted over the millennia as theirs has. In part this is because of their adherence to cultural markers such as the Sabbath and kosher laws. In years past, Christians have sought to preserve their culture through Sabbath observance, sexual morality, avoidance of foul language (or dancing or movies), and, among some, temperance and nonviolence.
  - (a) Which laws (practices) do you consider central for the prevention of acculturation?
  - (b) What considerations, if any, should trump these?
4. Is Augustine right? Is it wrong to lie to save a life? On the other end of the spectrum, was Bonhoeffer compromising Christian principles by conspiring to murder Hitler?
5. What do the guidelines of *pikuach nephesh* and *tza'ar baalei hayim* say about the morality of suicide, and particularly physician-assisted suicide?