



Parshas Mishpatim

For the week ending 27 Shevat 5759
12 - 13 February 1999

Overview

The Jewish People receive a series of laws concerning social justice. Topics include: Proper treatment of Jewish servants; a husband's obligations to his wife; penalties for hitting people and cursing parents, judges, and leaders; financial responsibilities for damaging people or their property, either by oneself or by one's animate or inanimate property, or by pitfalls that one created; payments for theft; not returning an object that one accepted responsibility to guard; the right to self-defense for a person being robbed.

Other topics include: Prohibitions against seduction; practicing witchcraft, bestiality and sacrifice to idols. The Torah warns us to treat the convert, widow and orphan with dignity, and to avoid lying. Usury is forbidden and the rights over collateral are limited. Payment of obligations to the Temple should not be delayed, and the Jewish People must be holy, even concerning food. The Torah teaches the proper conduct for judges in court proceedings. The commandments of Shabbos and the Sabbatical year are outlined. Three times a year — Pesach, Shavuos and Succos — we are told to come to the Temple. The Torah concludes this listing of laws with a law of kashrus — not to mix milk and meat.

Hashem promises that He will lead the Jewish People to the Land of Israel, helping them conquer the nations that live there, and tells them that by fulfilling His commandments they will bring blessings to their nation. The people promise to do and listen to everything that Hashem says. Moshe writes the Book of the Covenant, and reads it to the people. Moshe ascends the mountain for 40 days in order to receive the two Tablets of the Covenant.

Insights

DÉJA VU

“And these are the ordinances...” (21:1)

Déja vu. We've all had the feeling. Someone's talking and you know exactly what they're going to say. Or you're about to walk into a room and you visualize it exactly as it turns out to be. Nobody really understands déjà vu. One theory is that the brain experiences a kind of short-circuit. Information coming from the senses, the eyes, the ears, rather than being recognized by the brain as "live" information, is re-routed directly to the memory. The result is that even though you think you've seen it all before, in reality you are seeing something for the first time.

“And these are the statutes which you will place before them.” Rashi writes that the conjunction “and” tells us that just as the supra-logical commandments like *kashrus* and *shatnez* were given at Sinai, so too the “logical” commandments like the prohibitions against theft and murder, with which every civilized society concurs, are also from Sinai. One might think that the “logical” commandments were not of Divine origin, for we see that every society subscribes to them. For this reason, the Torah employs the conjunction “and” to tell us there is no difference. All the *mitzvos* are the word of G-d; the logical no less than the supra-logical.

There's a kind of déjà vu at work here. Civilized cultures believe that it is our own native logic that teaches us the societal prohibitions against killing and theft. We deem these concepts self-evident. The truth is that we are re-living a sense-memory implanted in our psyche by the Creator of the psyche itself. G-d didn't create this world to be a bleak and empty post-nuclear landscape with nothing but the sound of the wind whistling through a barren tundra. He created the world to be populous, to teem with life.

The reason that these commandments seem logical to us is because they are the fundamental basis of

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society. Without these fundamental principles, society descends instantly into barbarism and anarchy. G-d created within us an ability to recognize these laws as commonsense precisely because He wanted society to thrive.

How great is the mind of man that, though housed in a merely mortal frame, it can aspire to G-d's Torah! And how important is it to realize that everything to which the intellect can aspire is only because G-d created that power within us.

SURFACE TENSION

"We will do and we will obey." (24:7)

The Midrash tells us that before the Jewish People accepted the Torah, G-d offered it to all the other nations one by one and they rejected it. He offered it to the nation of Esav. Esav asked what was in it. G-d said "You mustn't kill." "We live by our sword" was their reply. G-d offered it to Yishmael. They too asked G-d what was in it. "Don't commit adultery." So Yishmael also turned it down. It wasn't congruent with their lifestyle. Finally G-d offered the Torah to the Jewish People and they said "We'll do and we'll hear."

There's something about this Midrash that is hard to understand: All those nations who then rejected the Torah now have laws against killing and adultery. If they themselves incorporated these laws into their legal systems, why was the Torah so difficult for them to accept? Seemingly, the Torah required no more of them than that to which they subsequently committed themselves.

The Talmud tells us that when we embarrass someone, it's as though we killed him. This is evidenced by the blood draining from his face. We are also taught that

Haftorah: Melachim II Ch. 11

PARSHAS SHEKALIM

In the months of Shevat, Adar and Nissan, we read four special passages of the Torah. Each is accompanied by its own special Haftorah. The Torah portions are to help us prepare for Purim and ultimately for Pesach. The four passages are: *Parshas Shekalim* which deals with the collection of the compulsory half-shekel for offerings in the *Beis Hamikdash*; *Parshas Zachor*, to remember the mitzvah of eradicating the memory of Amalek, who attacked the Jewish People after the Exodus from Egypt; *Parshas Parah*, which details the laws of how a person can cleanse himself from the spiritual impurity that results from contact with the dead; and finally, *Parshas HaChodesh*, the mitzvah of the sanctification of the new moon and the Pesach offering.

LIGHT WEIGHTS

The Midrash (*Eliyahu Rabba*) tells us that Hashem knew that in the month of Adar, Haman would offer Achashverosh, king of Persia, 10,000 *kikar* of silver if he would agree to the genocide of the Jewish People.

gazing at the opposite gender is considered an act of indecency. Behind the surface of each commandment, there is a subtlety and depth which requires a great deal of a person. The Torah is not just a dry legal system, it's the handbook of holiness. That's what these nations couldn't accept. When they realized that the Torah connoted infinitely more than its surface appearance, they instantly demurred.

FEELINGS

"The appearance of the glory of Hashem was like a consuming fire..." (24:17)

How do I know if G-d is pleased with me? How do I know if my service of the Creator is according to His wishes?

From the above verse, we can discern a powerful indicator of how G-d views our service to him. To test whether the "*appearance of the glory of Hashem*" exists in our service of the Creator, we should check for a feeling of wanting to serve G-d "*like a consuming fire*," with powerful enthusiasm and a deep love. For this indicates that G-d accepts our service. Since these feelings are planted in our hearts from Heaven, they are a certain sign that our service is received with favor.

Sources:

Déja Vu - *Ohr Gedaliyahu*

Surface Tension - *Rabbi Reuven Buckler in the name of Rabbi Yaakov Yitzchak Ruderman*

Feelings - *Kedushas Levi*

Thus, in "anticipation" of Haman's plan, Hashem gave the Jewish People the merit of the mitzvah of the half-shekel donation to the *Beis Hamikdash* a thousand years before Haman's plot.

It was this half-shekel, given in the service of the Creator, which outweighed all of Haman's 10,000 *kikar* of silver, and led to the salvation of the Jewish People in the time of Purim.

HALFNESS AND WHOLENESS

Why was it that specifically a half-shekel was given, and not a whole shekel?

A Jew must understand that alone he is only half the picture. Without his attachment to the community, he can never reach a state of completeness.

For Hashem has established His relationship between Himself and His *people*. A Jew has to look at himself as a "half-shekel." He only becomes whole when he links himself to the body of the Jewish People.

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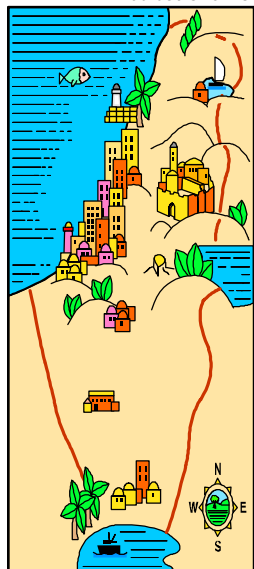
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LOVE OF THE LAND

Selections from classical Torah sources which express the special relationship between the People of Israel and Eretz Yisrael



PEKI'IN

Many legends surround this village in the north of Israel. New Peki'in was established as a Jewish community in 1955, a short distance from Old Peki'in, a village populated by Druze, Christians and a few Jews.

One tradition is that the Jewish community in Peki'in was never exiled from the Holy Land. Arab riots in 1936 forced the Jews of Peki'in to leave their homes for safer parts of the country and only a few of them later returned.

Another tradition is connected with the ancient synagogue which was restored in 1837. Two carved stones lying sideways were reportedly brought from Jerusalem and legend has it that they fell on their sides as a sign of mourning when the Temple was destroyed.

But certainly the most famous tradition regarding Peki'in is that it houses the cave in which the great Talmudic Sage Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai and his son Elazar hid from the Romans for thirteen years, miraculously sustained by a spring of water and a carob tree while totally absorbed in the study of Torah.

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