



Parshas Mishpatim

For the week ending 1 Adar I 5757
7 & 8 February 1997

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 physically damaging someone 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 sacrifices to idols. The Torah warns us to treat the convert, widow and orphan with dignity, and to avoid lying. Lending and 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, Shavuot 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 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

A BRICK OF SAPPHIRE - A PLANK OF WOOD

“Moshe, Aaron, Nadav and Avihu and seventy of the elders of Israel ascended. They saw the G-d of Israel, and under His feet was the likeness of a brick of sapphire, and its purity was like the essence of the heavens.” (24:9,10)

Dear Journal,

Something very strange happened to me yesterday.

Yesterday was *Simchat Torah* (the Festival of Rejoicing with the Torah). Somehow, I found myself celebrating the Festival in Tikvat Zion, a remarkably unremarkable Israeli town.

Graying stucco, peeling from grayer concrete, testify that this town isn't going to be another little New York, another Tel Aviv.

Anyway, yesterday I made my way to the town's municipal synagogue for *Simchat Torah*. There weren't a lot of people there. It's not a religious town. In fact the majority of those who were there were in their seventies and eighties. Most of them had come to Israel after the war. Most of them had been in the camps.

The reason I'm writing all this is because something very strange happened there. They were all dancing around with the *Sifrei Torah* (Torah Scrolls), just like a normal *Simchat Torah*, singing and dancing and making a lot of noise. People making '*Lechaims*.' Then all of a sudden, the singing and dancing stopped. A hush fell over the synagogue.

One of the old men went behind the holy Ark. He brought out a wooden plank about a meter and a half long and put it on the floor in the middle of the synagogue.

Slowly, as though summoned to some atavistic ritual, all the older members of the synagogue handed their Torah Scrolls to the youngsters, and silently began to circle the plank on the floor. Round and round they went, round and round. In total silence.

It was all over in a couple of minutes. As perfunctorily as it had started, so it ended. The synagogue returned to a typical *Simchat Torah* scene just as though nothing had happened. Children on the shoulders of their fathers waving flags, singing, dancing...

As the man who had brought out the plank emerged from the back of the holy Ark after putting it away, I asked him about what I had just witnessed.

This is what he said to me:

"During the war, we were all in the same camp together. By a miracle, someone managed to smuggle in a *Sefer Torah*. It was just before *Simchat Torah*. We were very frightened, maybe the Nazis, *yemach shemam*, would find it. So we pulled up the wooden floor and hid it under the floorboards.

"When *Simchat Torah* came, the Nazis were everywhere; they must have known something was up. There was no way we could risk taking out the Torah from its hiding place, and we were afraid that the guard would hear us if we made a noise. So we just walked around and around the place on the floor under which the Torah was hidden. They came in once. We just pretended we were going to our bunks or out the door — until they left, and then we carried on circling.

"So now, every year, we celebrate that *Simchat Torah* in the camps the way you just saw."

At the end of this week's *Parsha*, the Torah describes a brick of Sapphire. During the time when the Jewish People were slaves, this brick was before Hashem.

This brick was a memorial to the suffering they endured when they built the treasure cities of Egypt with bricks of mortar.

The '*essence of heavens*' refers to the light and joy before Hashem when they were redeemed.

Whenever the Torah describes the attributes of Hashem, it is so we may strive to emulate them.

Even when '*the essence of the heavens*' was revealed — even in the light and joy of redemption — '*the brick of sapphire*' of suffering was still there too.

By reminding ourselves of our suffering at the height of our joy, we experience an entirely new dimension to our rejoicing. Through this, we can understand on a deeper level the good that the Almighty bestows on us, and thank Him with a full heart.

Rashi, Rabbi Yerucham Levovitz, Zale Newman, Moshe Averick

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UNDER THE EYE

"An eye for an eye..." (21:23)

The star of the movie '2001 — A Space Odyssey' was a schizophrenic super-computer called HAL (Heuristically programmed Algorithmic computer). At the time, it was said that the name of the computer hinted to the computer giant IBM, because if you take the letters 'HAL' and substitute them with the letters which follow them in the alphabet, you get 'IBM'.

Actually, HAL is a pale plagiarism of the real thing: Our Sages teach us that when the Torah says "An eye for an eye," it means that if a person blinds someone, he has to pay financial compensation. It does **not** mean that they are punished by having his own eyesight removed.

This is hinted to in the Torah. The literal Hebrew translation of the phrase "An eye for an eye" is "An eye **under** an eye." Why does the Torah use such an unusual expression here?

In the Hebrew *alefbet*, the letters which follow the letters of the word 'ayin' (eye) spell 'kesef' (money).

In other words, if you take the Hebrew letters which are **under** the word 'eye' you get 'money'.

Therefore, the 'eye' which is '**under**' the 'eye' is 'money.' Financial reimbursement is the eye which is 'under' the eye.

The Gaon of Vilna

RING AROUND THE COLLAR

"When a man will steal..." (21:37)

Jews aren't perfect. But their crime statistics are very low. And when Jews commit crimes, they are usually in secret rather than openly. Mugging is statistically insignificant amongst Jews, whereas 'white-collar' crime such as embezzlement and tax fraud occur with more frequency. Why should that be?

The Torah states that a burglar who steals covertly is '*sold in his thievery*,' whereas a thief who comes brazenly to steal is not sold. The essence of the Jewish People is that they are not only the *Eternal* People, but they are also the *Internal* People.

The Jews belong to the World of the Inside, the World of Freedom. It was for this reason, they *had* to be redeemed from Egypt, because on the mystical level, they are not part of the World of Captivity, the World of the Outside.

A thief who goes about his trade openly is indeed performing a crime, but he is not using and distorting this unique quality of the Jewish People.

However, someone who steals in secret, who burgles or cheats on his tax, is employing and distorting that elevated quality which is the essence of the Jewish People — the World of Freedom, the World of the Inside.

Shem MiShmuel

Haftorah Shabbos-Rosh Chodesh: Yishyahu 66:1-24

When Rosh Chodesh fall on Shabbos, the regular Haftorah is replaced by a special Haftorah — the last chapter of the Book of Yishayahu (Isaiah).

This chapter was chosen because of its penultimate verse which links Shabbos and Rosh Chodesh: "*And it shall be that, from New Moon to New Moon, and from Shabbos to Shabbos, all flesh shall come and prostrate themselves before Me, said Hashem.*" (66:23) This verse is also repeated after the end of the reading.

HAPPY BIRTH DAY

"Shall I bring (a woman) to the birth stool and not have her give birth?" (66:9)

When we look at the situation today, it's easy to despair. The strident metallic clang of materialism and selfishness seem to swamp out the message of the Torah and its People. The sensuous siren call of the media surrounds us all with a CD world of illusion. Virtual Reality masquerades as the real thing.

The world seems to be deaf to morality, to modesty, to the values that are rooted in the Torah. The motto of the time is "Let it all hang out." In a world where there is nothing to be ashamed of, nothing brings shame, and thus anything is possible. And what is possible — happens.

Those who stand for the eternal values of our People are despised as fundamentalists and violent barbarians. Everything has been turned upside down.

The prophets speak in many places about the coming of *Mashiach* in terms of childbirth.

Someone who is ignorant of the process of childbirth and sees for the first time a woman in labor would be convinced that she is about to die. And the closer the actual moment of the birth, the stronger that impression would become.

And then, within a couple of minutes, seeming tragedy has turned into the greatest joy. A new life has entered the world.

This is the way *Mashiach* will come. The worse things become, the more painful the birth pangs, the nearer is his coming. Until, like a mother who has delivered, all the tears and pain will be forgotten in the great joy of a new life.

INSIGHTS INTO THE ZEMIRO
SUNG AT THE SHABBOS TABLE
THROUGHOUT THE GENERATIONS.



**YOM ZEH MECHUBAD -scufn vz ouh
"THIS IS THE MOST PRECIOUS OF DAYS..."**

Therefore shall each man say *kiddush* on his wine **asehubhch aht kf if kg** *Al cayn call ish b'yano y'kadash*

There are two opinion in the Talmud as to which should be said first in the *kiddush* of Shabbos, the blessing on the wine or the blessing on the day. We follow the ruling of Beis Hillel and first make the blessing on wine.

In addition to the explicit reasons offered by Beis Hillel for this order it has been suggested that there is another unexpressed one. Before a person pronounces a blessing on food or drink, say our Sages (*Berachos* 35b), it is considered the property of Hashem. Only after a Jew makes the blessing on the wine does it become "his wine" with which he can properly sanctify the Shabbos with his *kiddush*.

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