**Parshas Mishpatim**

**Summary**

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, Shavuos and Succos—we are told to come home to the Temple. The Torah concludes this listing of Laws with a Law of kashrus—not 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 Temple. The Torah shows such concern for the welfare of someone's property, commanding us to go out of our way to return his animal to him even a hundred times over, surely all the more so must we be concerned to return a person to himself, to try and reach out to our brothers and sisters who have lost their identity as Jews, to show them the beauty and depth of the Torah.

**Commentaries**

**RETURN TO SENDER**

“If you encounter an ox of your enemy or his donkey wandering, you shall return it to him repeatedly.” (23:4) We live in an era when it’s hard to find a real atheist. Once, there was a young Jew from the shtetl (village) who had set his heart on being an apikorus (atheist). He traveled to the city of Odessa in the hope of meeting Yosel the apikorus - a famous atheist. On his arrival in the big city, he asked to be directed to the house of Yosel the apikorus, and he soon found himself standing before the door of the famous man. Wafiting through the door came the familiar lilting tune of someone learning gemara. He knocked on the door, and the tune abruptly stopped. “Come in!” called a voice. He gingerly pushed the door open, and there, seated in front of him, was an old Jew with a long flowing white beard and peyos. “Excuse me for disturbing you. I’m looking for Yosel the apikorus.” The old Jew paused, looked at him, and said “You’ve found him. I am Yosel the apikorus.” “But...but...” he spluttered, “But, but the beard, the peyos. The gemara!” Yosel replied to him “I’m Yosel the apikorus, not Yosel the ignoramus.” Nowadays it’s difficult to find an authentic card-carrying atheist. They’re an endangered species, because most of us don’t really know what it is that we don’t believe in. Our doubts are not based on knowledge; rather we have become strangers in a strange land, unlettered in our own heritage. Mohammed called us “The People of The Book.” The problem is that most of us can’t read The Book anymore, let alone understand it. We are like sheep who have strayed so far from home that we have forgotten that a home even exists. “If you encounter an ox of your enemy or his donkey wandering, you shall return it to him repeatedly.” If the Torah shows such concern for the welfare of someone’s property, commanding us to go out of our way to return his animal to him even a hundred times over, surely all the more so must we be concerned to return a person to himself, to try and reach out to our brothers and sisters who have lost their identity as Jews, to show them the beauty and depth of the Torah.

In our times, when so many of us are like sheep lost in a spiritual wilderness, when we have no idea how to get back home, or even that there is a home, it is a tremendous mitzva for those who can be shepherds to guide the lost and the benighted on the path that leads home to the light of Jewish self-awareness.

*(Based on the Chafetz Chaim and Il”t Rabbi Nota Schiller)*
Honorable Thieves

“If a man shall steal an ox or a sheep or goat, and slaughter it or sell it, he shall pay five cattle in place of the ox, and four in place of the sheep.” (21:37)

Man is a deeply sensitive creature, very easily hurt and embarrassed. Unconsciously, he can cause himself deep, self-inflicted emotional wounds. Ironically, however, exactly that which he thinks is the cure for his ills, can be the emotional poison which is damaging him...

In this week’s Parsha there is a halachah which, on the surface, is very puzzling: Someone who steals an ox has to pay back five oxen, but someone who steals a sheep only has to pay back four sheep. Our Sages teach us that the Torah shows concern even for the self-respect of a thief: Stealing a sheep requires the thief to carry the animal upon his shoulders, which is most undignified, and so if he is caught, he has to pay only four sheep, whereas one who steals an ox merely leads the animal by a rope, which isn’t embarrassing, and so his penalty is greater - five oxen.

So, in reality, a sheep-stealer should also pay back five sheep, but in view of the fact that he has already suffered severe humiliation, the Torah considers that he has already paid part of his penalty. It must be then, that his humiliation is not something abstract, but it is so great as to be quantifiable in money. This is rather strange, for if in fact a thief does feel such tremendous embarrassment, why would he steal in the first place? And also, if we were to approach the thief at the scene of the crime and suggest to him that he must be experiencing the most terrible humiliation, he would almost certainly reply: “You must be joking! I’m getting away with a sheep! You know what this is worth?...”

“You must be joking! I’m getting away with a sheep! You know what this is worth?...” (21:17)

And yet the Torah, which sees to the very deepest levels of a person’s psyche, tells us that the thief is in point of fact suffering terrible humiliation - equivalent to the payment of money - otherwise how could his penalty have been thus reduced? The fact of the matter is that at the moment of the theft, the thief does feel a tremendous sense of depression and disgrace. He feels cheap. He experiences deep emotional trauma, yet he has no idea why he feels this way. And thus, he carries on stealing and causes himself more and more emotional angst, thinking that another 'job' will get him out of his emotional slump. And so the vicious circle spirals ever downward.

Only by observing the Torah can one be truly happy in this world, because only the Designer understands the true nature of His creations, and only He knows what makes one happy and sad. Only Hashem knows which actions a person should stay away from and which he should embrace in order to live a rich, happy and fulfilled life.

(Adapted from Chidushei Halev)

Feelings

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

How do I know if Hashem is pleased with me? How do I know if what I’m doing in my service of the Creator is as He wishes it to be? From this verse we can discern a powerful indicator of how Hashem views our service to Him. To test whether the “appearance of the glory of Hashem” exists in our service of the Creator, one should know that the feeling of wanting to serve Hashem “like a consuming fire,” with powerful enthusiasm and a deep love, indicates that Hashem accepts our service - since these feelings are planted in our hearts from heaven, this is a certain sign that our service is received with favor.

(Kedushas Levi)

Haftorah for Parshas Shekalim: Melachim II Chapter 11

When ½ > 10,000

Hashem is beyond any concept of time. Events which to us are separated by thousands of years, are seen by Hashem in a state of constant 'now'. The Midrash (Eliahu Rabba, Megilla 13b) 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. 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 Hamidkash. The Midrash (Kedushas Levi) states that the merit of the half-shekel donation to the Beis Hamidkash 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.

“Who gives zemiros in the night”

He who makes a distinction between the sacred and the secular...”He who makes a distinction between the sacred and the secular...

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

When something happens which is not what we hoped for we are often tempted to think of it as evil to complain about when in truth it is for our benefit and deserves to be sung about.

“Night” is an allusion to those situations which seem so dark and evil. With the departure of the Shabbos, when we enjoyed a taste of the perfect joy of the World to Come, we return to the difficulties of the world we now live in. We therefore draw courage for facing the challenges of the week ahead by reminding ourselves that even those events which appear like the night will eventually be appreciated by us as something to sing about because they have been orchestrated by the Merciful One “Who gives zemiros in the night.”

After singing zemiros during the three meals of Shabbos we make the transition to the weekdays by this singing “Who gives zemiros in the night” which separates the sacred from the routine.

Insights into the Zemiroth sung at the Shabbos table throughout the generations

Haorol Bein Kohsh LeChod kiy kase ile knsv

“Hewron kesad she’arah be’eheneh es revarad...”

Insights into the Zemiroth sung at the Shabbos table throughout the generations

Parshas Mishpatim

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