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PARSHA INSIGHTS

by Rabbi Yaakov Asher Sinclair

No Feeding the Cats

“If you see the donkey of your enemy lying under its burden, you shall surely help him with it...” (23:5)

My daughters aren’t big cat fans. That is except for my youngest, who loves them. There was a marmalade tom who used to come around to get fed by my youngest, and the other girls strictly forbade her to give him anything. Early one morning my wife was going into the kitchen when she saw my daughter taking some meat scraps out of the microwave.

“For the cat?” my wife asked.

“Yes, Ima.”

“But why are you heating it up?”

Said my daughter, “Look Ima, this cat doesn’t have any *Olam HaBah* — so I want him to have as much *Olam HaZeh* as possible.”

Parshat Mishpatim is about caring when no one is looking.

The Torah commands us not to cause unnecessary suffering to animals.

Not just for the sake of the animal, but because cruelty damages the human soul.

The Torah demands kindness precisely where there is no gratitude, no recognition. Animals won’t thank you. They won’t remember.

But *you will*.

Parshat Mishpatim teaches us that a person becomes righteous through the quiet choices that shape who they are.

Olam HaBah is built in Olam HaZeh — standing in a kitchen, warming food for a creature that can never repay you.

Holiness is built when no one’s looking.

PARSHA OVERVIEW

Hashem tells Moshes to place before the Jewish People a series of laws concerning financial responsibility and social justice. Topics include: Proper treatment of Jewish servants; husband's obligations toward his wife; penalties for striking others and for 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 and for not returning an object that one accepted responsibility to guard; the right to self-defense of a person being robbed.

Other topics include: Prohibitions against seduction; witchcraft, bestiality and sacrifices to idols; the warning to treat the convert, widow and orphan with dignity, and to avoid lying. Lending and borrowing at interest 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 Shabbat and the Sabbatical year are outlined. Three times a year — for the festivals of Pesach, Shavuot and Succot — we are to come to the Temple. The Torah concludes this listing of laws with a *kashrut* law: Do not cook or mix meat and milk.

Parashas Mishpatim concludes with a 'flashback' to the events leading up to the giving of the Torah, including the Jewish People's famous words of acceptance: "*Na'aseh v'Nishma* - we will do and we will listen." Moshe, Aaron, Nadav and Avihu, and the seventy elders ascend and have a Divine revelation; Moshe and Yehoshua ascend further. Finally, Moshe alone ascends the mountain - covered in fire and cloud - and remains there for forty days and forty nights.

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Questions

1. In what context is a mezuzah mentioned in this week's parsha?
2. What special mitzvah does the Torah give to the master of a Hebrew maidservant?
3. What is the penalty for wounding one's father or mother?
4. A intentionally hits B. As a result, B is close to death. Besides any monetary payments, what happens to A?
5. What is the penalty for someone who tries to murder a particular person, but accidentally kills another person instead? Give two opinions.
6. A slave goes free if his master knocks out one of the slave's teeth. What teeth do not qualify for this rule and why?
7. An ox gores another ox. What is the maximum the owner of the damaging ox must pay, provided his animal had gored no more than twice previously?
8. From where in this week's parsha is the importance of work demonstrated?
9. What is meant by the words "If the sun shone upon him"?
10. A person is given an object for safe-keeping. Later, he swears it was stolen. Witnesses come and say that he, in fact, is the one who stole it. How much must he pay?
11. A person borrows his employee's car. The car is struck by lightning. How much must the borrower pay?
12. Why is lending money at interest called "biting"?
13. Non-kosher meat, "treifa," is preferentially fed to dogs. Why?
14. Which verse forbids listening to slander?
15. What constitutes a majority-ruling in a capital case?
16. How is Shavuot referred to in this week's parsha?
17. How many prohibitions are transgressed when cooking meat and milk together?
18. What was written in the *Sefer HaBrit* which Moshe wrote prior to the Giving of the Torah?
19. What was the *Livnat HaSapir* - the Sapphire Brick - a reminder of?
20. Who was Efrat? Who was her husband? Who was her son?

Answers

1. 21:6 - If a Hebrew slave desires to remain enslaved, his owner brings him “to the doorpost *mezuzah*” to pierce his ear.
2. 21:8,9 - To marry her.
3. 21:15 - Death by strangulation.
4. 21:19 - He is put in jail until B recovers or dies.
5. 21:23 - (a) The murderer deserves the death penalty. (b) The murderer is exempt from death but must compensate the heirs of his victim.
6. 21:26 - Baby teeth, which grow back.
7. 21:35 - The full value of his own animal.
8. 21:37 - From the “five-times” penalty for stealing an ox and slaughtering it. This fine is seen as punishment for preventing the owner from plowing with his ox.
9. 22:2 - If it is as clear as the sun that the thief has no intent to kill.
10. 22:8 - Double value of the object.
11. 22:14 – Nothing.
12. 22:24 - Interest is like a snake bite: Just as the poison is not noticed at first but soon overwhelms the person, so too interest is barely noticeable until it accumulates to an overwhelming sum.
13. 22:30 - As “reward” for their silence during the plague of the first-born.
14. 23:1 - Targum Onkelos translates “Don't bear a false report” as “Don't receive a false report”.
15. 23:2 - A simple majority is needed for an acquittal. A majority of two is needed for a ruling of guilt.
16. 23:16 - *Chag Hakatzir* -- Festival of Reaping.
17. 23:19 - One.
18. 24:4,7 - The Torah, starting from Bereishet until the Giving of the Torah, and the *mitzvot* given at Mara.
19. 24:10 - That the Jews in Egypt were forced to toil by making bricks.
20. 24:14 - Miriam, wife of Calev, mother of Chur.

COUNTING OUR BLESSINGS

by Rabbi Reuven Lauffer

BIRKAT HAGOMEL Thanksgiving Blessing (Part 4)

“A ship in harbor is safe, but that’s not what ships are built for.”
G.T. Shedd

AFTERWORD

In Temple times, when a person had a Halachic obligation to thank Hashem they would come to the Holy Temple in Yerushalayim and offer up a *Korban Todah* – a thanksgiving offering. The four categories of people required to do so are the same as those required to recite *Birkat HaGomel* nowadays.

Although it was not an expensive offering, it was a large offering. It comprised forty loaves of bread, of which thirty were *matzah* [unleavened] and ten were *chametz* [leaven]. This combination was unique, as no other offering in the Temple was made up of a combination of both *matzah* and *chametz* together.

Rabbi Shimon Schwab eloquently describes the *matzah* as symbolizing the obvious miracles that take place in our lives:

Just as we eat *matzah* on Pesach to symbolize our deliverance from slavery, so, too, the person offering a *Korban Todah* to the Temple brings *matzah* to symbolize his having been saved from an obviously perilous situation. By contrast, the *chametz* – regular, mundane bread – represents all the “miraculous” occurrences that happen to us on a daily basis without our even realizing. We assume that a loaf of bread is a natural consequence of mixing water, flour and yeast, but the *Korban Todah* is telling us “Stop! Reflect for a moment. Realize that there is nothing ‘natural’ in our world. Everything, but everything, originates from Hashem.”

It transpires that the *Korban Todah* was more than just an offering; the *Korban Todah* was a learning experience, a “visual aid” to teach the person, having just experienced a miraculous escape from danger, to look closely at their regular, humdrum existence and try and identify just how many blessings Hashem showers upon them every single day. To identify what Nachmanides calls the “hidden miracles” that surround us at all times.

Our Sages offer a beautiful insight as to why the *Korban Todah* was so large: There was no way, they explain, that one person could possibly eat so many loaves of bread within the timeframe that the Halacha allots. They would thus need to invite others to join; during this festive meal, they would share with all the participants the miraculous events that necessitated their bringing this *Korban Todah* and - in so doing - publicize Hashem’s goodness and blessings to all those gathered there.

Through the *Korban Todah* our Sages are teaching us a fundamental lesson: Good fortune should be shared. Not in order to brag about one's *mazal* – that is a thoughtless and spiteful thing to do - but because the more we include others in our providence, the greater will be our appreciation for what Hashem has done for us. And the greater our appreciation, the greater are our feelings of thanksgiving. All it requires is to learn how to feel Hashem's caresses as He accompanies us throughout our day.

In Sefer Tehillim (104:24) King David writes: “*Mal'ah Ha'aretz Kinyanecha – The earth is filled with Your possessions.*” The simple understanding, say the commentaries, is that Hashem has complete mastery and ownership over the world – that every part of the creation is His. However, Rabbi Dov Ber the Maggid of Mezeritch (1704-1772), one of the closest disciples of the Ba'al Shem Tov and his chosen successor, would interpret the words homiletically “Earthliness is filled [with abundant opportunities] to acquire [closeness with] You!”

Birkat HaGomel is the opportunity to recognize clearly that *all* the blessings in my life – both the obvious ones and the “mundane” ones – emanate from only One Source. And it is an unparalleled moment to thank Hashem for having “bestowed every goodness upon me.”

TAAMEI HAMITZVOS – Reasons behind the Mitzvos

by Rabbi Shmuel Kraines

THE JEWISH “SLAVE”

Mitzvos #42, #345, #346, and #482 in *Sefer HaChinuch*; *Shemos* 21:2, *Vayikra* 25:39-43, and *Devarim* 15:13-18.

THE MITZVAH

A Jewish man can become a slave in one of two ways: (a) If he steals and cannot repay, Beis Din sells him as a slave to another Jew, and the proceeds of the sale go to repay the debt. (b) If he willingly sells himself into bondage.

Although the Torah discusses the laws of a Jewish slave, it distinguishes clearly between him and a true slave. The Torah forbids working a Jewish slave harshly and degradingly or selling him as one would sell an ordinary slave. The Torah obligates the master to ensure that the slave's living conditions are no worse than his own, to the point that if the master has only one pillow, he must give it to the slave. The Sages remark about the rights of the Jewish slave: “Acquiring a Jewish slave is like acquiring a master” (*Kiddushin* 20a). Furthermore, the “slavery” lasts for no more than six years, which is more like a term of hired labor than a term of slavery. The only exception is in a case where the slave wishes to remain in slavery after the term of six years expires. In any case, all Jewish slaves go free when the Yovel (Jubilee) year arrives.

THE SIX-YEAR TERM

The Torah begins the monetary laws in our *parashah* with this Mitzvah of the Jewish slave because it relates to the first of the Ten Commandments, in which Hashem proclaimed that He is our God Who took us out of Egypt; having redeemed us and made us His slaves, He does not want us to become slaves of others. The Jewish slave goes free either at the onset of the seventh year of his servitude or at the onset of Yovel, whichever comes first. Yovel is the completion of the seven seven-year Shemittah cycles, and thus, both these times of freedom are associated with the number seven. This commemorates how Hashem created the world in six days and rested on the seventh, which is a second reason why it is His right to be our sole master (*Ramban*).

This explanation gives rise to a question: Why does the Torah not command us to free Jewish slaves in Shemittah, the *seventh* year? We may suggest that if slaves went free every Shemittah, those sold in the sixth year would serve for very little. Moreover, thefts might abound every sixth year as Shemittah approaches.

Alternatively, we may explain the six-year limit as follows: In olden times, it was customary for hired laborers to sign a contract for three years (*Bechor Shor*). In order to distinguish a Jewish slave from a regular gentile slave, the Torah limits his work term to double the standard length of paid servitude. This double measure of punishment is especially fitting for a thief, whom the Torah obligated to return double the amount he stole.

GIFTS UPON DEPARTURE

A Jewish man who had to undergo the humiliation of being sold into slavery is bound to feel lowly even when he goes free. Hashem therefore commanded the mitzvah of *Ha'anaka*, that we free him with visible honor to remind him and others of his Jewish nobility, reminding us how Hashem similarly made the Egyptians give us many valuables when setting us free. Another reason for this Mitzvah is that it is appropriate to be compassionate to those who work for us and to give them more than their wages (*Sefer HaChinuch*). Furthermore, the blessing of the household may have increased because of the hard work and merit of the Jewish slave, so it is only fair that he receive a share in it when he leaves (*Rav Menachem HaBavli*).

A DOSE OF HUMOR (Take Only as Needed)

A Dose of Humor (*take only as needed*)

A Canaanite slave is set free if his master strikes him and knocks out his tooth (Shemot 21:27). A Hebrew slave, by contrast - although paid damages for the value of his tooth - remains a slave until the end of his period of servitude (Rashi Ibid. 21:7). Could this be why he is called an...indentured servant? 🤔 😊 😊