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Dvar Torah

Parashat Mishpatim

Downgrading to angelic leadership?

Coming off the spiritual and emotional high of the Aseret haDibrot in Parshat Yitro, Parshat Mishpatim is replete with the “boring” stuff: civil law, Shabbat, laws of damages, etc. It is hard to imagine the change in national mood from hearing HaShem speak to the Jewish people to hearing Moshe Rabbeinu lecture about the laws of borrowing objects. Coupling this odd transition is an often-overlooked angel sighting at the end of the Parasha:

In Shemot 23:20, we are told “הִנֵּה אֲנֹכִי שֹׁלֵחַ מַלְאָךְ, לְפָנֶיךָ, לְשֹׁמְרֶךָ, בְּדַרְךְךָ; וְלְהַבִּיאֲךָ, אֶל-הַמְּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר-” Behold! I send an angel before you to protect you on the way, and to bring you to the place I have made ready for you (translation, Artscroll Tanach). This passuk is quite puzzling given what we have already seen in Sefer Shemot.

HaShem forged a close, direct bond with the Jewish people during the Exodus story. The Haggadah reminds us that HaShem was directly involved in our salvation from Egypt: “אני ולא מלאך”, it was I (who took you out) and not an angel. Similarly, at the splitting of the Sea, the Jews see direct intervention from HaShem: “וַיֵּרָא יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת-הַיָּד הַגְּדֹלָה, אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה ה' בְּמִצְרַיִם” Israel saw the great hand that HaShem inflicted upon Egypt (Shemot 14:31). Finally, at Har Sinai, the people had such a close encounter with HaShem that they feared for their lives (ibid. 20,16).

After all of the spiritual connecting that took place between HaShem and the Jewish people over the beginning of Sefer Shemot, why are the Jewish people about to be guided through the desert by an angel rather than by HaShem’s directhand?

Rabbi Ezra Bick of Yeshivat Har Etzion suggests that the transition from the Aseret haDibrot to civil law and the change from HaShem’s direct intervention to leadership from an angel both accomplish an important watershed moment for the Jewish people. Following all of the highs of leaving Egypt, the Jewish people have transitioned from being completely reliant on a foreign ruler to completely reliant on HaShem. At no point do they learn how to live ordinary, everyday lives. Their entire existence is sustained by miraculous moments: Manna from the heavens, the sun standing in the sky, water coming out of stones. Therefore, as the Jews turn away from Har Sinai towards their final destination of Eretz Yisrael, they need to learn to transition to how to live everyday, how to treat one another and how not to rely on regular, miraculous intervention.

Our lives are often in a balance between uplifting spiritual moments and the valleys between them. We may have a wonderful Shabbat, an inspirational kumzitz or a terrific family moment. The challenge is to make meaningful the ordinary times. The day-to-day grind of class and work can feel quite mundane. This week, we are reminded that they can also be imbued with meaning and value, as long as we maintain the proper spiritual compass.

Shabbat Shalom,
Rabbi Aron Srolovitz