

Parshat Mishpatim

Friday, February 9, 2018

כד שבט תשע"ח

From the Lower School

1. How many years does a Jewish servant work for before going free?
 2. If you steal a neighbor's sheep and sell it, how many sheep do you do you need to return?
 3. How often do farmers need to let their land rest?
 4. When HaShem asked Bnei Yisrael if they would keep the Torah, how did Bnei Yisrael respond?
- How long did Moshe stay on Har Sinai?

— Rabbi Aron Srolovitz — JKHA Assistant Principal
Answers can be found on the last page.

From the Middle School

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 *parsha*:

In Shemot 23:20, we are told “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;” 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: “it was I (who took you out) and not an angel.” Similarly, at the splitting of the Sea, the Jews see

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direct intervention from HaShem: “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 direct hand?

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.

— Rabbi Aron Srolovitz — JKHA Assistant Principal

From the High School

Two Perspectives on Shabbat

In this week’s *parsha*, *parshat Mishpatim*, the account of the Torah shifts from the study of stories to the study of *halachot*, or laws. This week, we learn of the regulation of the judicial system through the laws that govern cases including murder, manslaughter, theft, property damage, loaning, and borrowing. Most of the laws listed in this week’s *parsha* are documented for the first time; however, the commandment to observe Shabbat was already mentioned in last week’s *parsha*. Last week we read, “Remember the Sabbath day and sanctify it. Six days you may

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work and perform all your labor, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord, your God; you shall perform no labor, neither you, your son, your daughter, your manservant, your maidservant, your beast, nor your stranger who is in your city” (*Shemot* 20:8-9). In contrast, in this week’s *parsha* we read, “Six days you may do your work, but on the seventh day you shall rest, in order that your ox and your donkey should rest, and your maidservant’s son and the stranger shall be refreshed” (23:12).

So which one is it? Do we observe Shabbat because God rested or because we want our family members to rest? Perhaps the answer to this question lies in the transition between these two *parshiot*. In last week’s *parsha*, our connection to Shabbat comes from a religious perspective: God rested therefore we should rest. In contrast, in this week’s *parsha*, our motivation to observe Shabbat comes from the social benefits of granting a day off to our employees. The transition from spiritual connection to social nature doesn’t need to be mutually exclusive. In fact, we can approach Shabbat from the lens of spirituality and the lens of social progress. If we approach this question from both directions, we are given the option to choose either one or both ways through which to connect to Shabbat. God wants us to think back to the spiritual and historical significance of Himself resting after six days of work, but God also wants us to advance the social nature of the world and accommodate ourselves by resting on Shabbat. There are many ways through which we are able to make Shabbat a more meaningful and restful day that are included in the actual text of the Torah if we just take the time to look and explore.

- Gabrielle Buch is a Junior at RKYHS

We Will Do and We Will Hear

In *parshat Mishpatim*, Am Yisrael proclaims that it will keep the Torah by stating, “We will do and we will hear” (*Shemot* 24:7). The classic issue is raised: You can’t do before you hear what it is you must do. So, what is Am Yisrael conveying by phrasing its response in this way?

To answer this question, let’s begin with an analogy: Your boss asks you if you would like to take on an unnamed assignment. Either you can show your true devotion to the company and its cause by saying, “Yes, I’ll do it. What should I do?” or you can give a more noncommittal answer and say, “Well, what is the assignment? After you tell me, then I will decide.”

The second response is not wrong; in this situation it was actually a responsible answer. However, regarding Am Yisrael at Har Sinai, the

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second answer was essentially impossible to say while still displaying true, sincere faith. Why is that so? The Jewish nation had JUST witnessed blatant Godly miracles throughout the experience of *yetziat Mitzrayim*; they recognized that an Ultimate Power, namely God, exists and therefore that the right choice was to stick with Him and His Torah. If they believed this, then there was no way they would even need to contemplate what the details are in this contract, the Torah. If God is offering it, they know that whatever it is, it's the truth! Therefore, the response that would convey and emphasize their complete faith was said in a way that ignores the details and just focuses on the big picture: Yes we believe in You, Hashem, and so we will do whatever You say. We believe this choice is the correct and best one and we are committed.

Wouldn't it be great if we could be so confident in our commitment these days just like Am Yisrael was 3,000 years ago at Har Sinai? The reality is that in today's day in age, stories of blatant miracles are uncommon. Today's world doesn't present clear signage posts that say, "The right path is this way." Our everyday world holds a lot of confusion and questions.

The good news is that our Boss is well aware of and ok with that fact and the impact it has on the steadiness and strength of our faith. He knows that when times are great and even the natural world encourages our commitment, we will stand strong, but that when things inevitably slide a bit downhill we might face challenging thoughts and questions that dig at our deepest commitments in life.

Just like God doesn't expect us to be like Moshe Rabeinu (though we have the potential to be,) He doesn't expect us to have the clarity that Am Yisrael did at Har Sinai. Knowing that you've committed yourself to a life that – at the best of times – seems the most fulfilling and true, and that you will simply try your hardest to keep that commitment, is today's way of saying, "We will do and we will hear."

- Mrs. Blima Maged — HS, Judaic Faculty

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- (1) Six years
- (2) Four
- (3) One year out of seven
- (4) נעשה ונשמע We will do and we will obey
- (5) Forty days and forty nights