

FREEDOM AND RESPONSIBILITY

Miriam Kolodny '28

In this week's *parsha*, we discuss the many laws and *halachot* pertaining to a variety of topics, among them the laws regarding Jewish slavery. Trying to prevent Jewish slavery, our rabbis came up with only two cases in which it is permitted: for a thief who cannot repay the value of what he has stolen and for a man struggling with financial issues, unable to support himself. Both cases were designed to ensure that no Jew would be sold into slavery against his or her will, the way the Jews had been sold and traded in *Mitzrayim*. Furthermore, the rabbis also declared that a slave can only be a slave for six years before either being freed in the seventh year with gifts from his master, or, if he chooses to stay a slave, receiving a brand on his ear.

When a slave is freed, he is given two hundred *zuz*, the equivalent of fifty *selaim*, enough money to be considered financially comfortable. However, if a slave is freed with gifts and decides to stay, he is punished because he has no need to be a slave anymore. *Rashi* quotes a *Midrash* on this idea which says that a slave who decides to stay should be branded on his left ear. However, generally, in the Torah, body parts on the right side are usually chosen, so why on the left ear? The answer to this question requires us to return to *Har Sinai*. When Hashem spoke, his words came out from his right side, implying that the Jewish people heard Him from their left side. Thus, when Hashem commanded His people not to steal, we learn that those who do steal should be branded on their left ear to show that they did not adhere to Hashem's command.

JUSTICE WITH COMPASSION

Avraham Weinstock '27

Parshat Mishpatim marks a transition from the miraculous revelation at *Har Sinai* to the description of the detailed laws that will guide both the Jewish people's morals and society. While the laws in this *parsha* may seem very technical, they reveal the Torah's emphasis on justice and compassion.

One of the most powerful lessons is found in *23:10*:

"וְגֵר לֹא תִלְחָץ וְאַתֶּם יְדַעְתֶּם אֶת נֶפֶשׁ הַגֵּר כִּי גֵרִים הֱיִיתֶם בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם"

"*Do not oppress the stranger, for you know the soul of the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt*."

This commandment appears multiple times throughout the Torah, but here it is framed far more personally. Not merely saying, "Don't mistreat the stranger," but rather, meant to appeal to our shared experience as a nation, one that had been enslaved and oppressed just a few weeks prior.

The Torah is reminding us here that we know what it feels like to be an outsider and to lack security, and we know how it feels to be redeemed from that. The Torah wants us to use that experience to shape how we treat others. It's easy to become detached from the struggles of others, especially when we are in a position of comfort or privilege, but the Torah demands more from us, asking us to empathize deeply, to step into the shoes of the vulnerable, and to act with the kindness that we were so cruelly deprived of in slavery.

Further emphasizing this point with a *pasuk* in *Sefer Vayikra*, the Torah teaches us that justice must be impartial:

"לֹא תַעֲשׂוּ עָוֶל בַּמִּשְׁפָּט לֹא תִשָּׂא פְנֵי דָל וְלֹא תֶהְדַּר פְּנֵי גָדוֹל בְּצֶדֶק תִּשְׁפֹּט עֲמִיתֶךָ"

"Do not show favoritism to the poor or defer to the great; with justice you shall judge your fellow." (19:15)

While having compassion for the vulnerable is undoubtedly important, compassion should not override fairness, just as fairness should not negate compassion. The Torah establishes a delicate balance: while we are called to be empathetic and kind, we are also obligated to ensure that justice is dealt fairly. To favor someone because they are poor or powerful undermines the integrity of the system, as true justice is blind to external factors and grounded in truth.

We live in a very polarized world, where people take extreme sides, often prioritizing strict justice without compassion or embracing endless empathy without structure or fairness. *Parshat Mishpatim* reminds us that these two values must work together, justice ensuring that society runs smoothly and fairly, while compassion ensures that society remains moral and sensitive.

The *Ramban* points out that many of the *mitzvot* in this *parsha* are designed not only to create an ethical society but also to create ethical people, seen in the laws about lending money to the poor.

"אִם כֶּסֶף תַּלְוֶה אֶת עַמִּי אֶת הֶעָנִי עִמָּךְ לֹא תִהְיֶה לוֹ כְנֹשֶׁה לֹא תְשִׂימוּן עָלָיו נֶשֶׁךְ"

"If you lend money to My people, to the poor among you, do not act toward them as a creditor; do not impose interest upon them." (Shemot 22:24)

Showing us the importance of sensitivity and dignity, the Torah cautions us not to take advantage of the vulnerability of those in need, warning us not to humiliate them, teaching us to uplift and support, not to use others' hardship for personal gain.

Ultimately, *Parshat Mishpatim* shows us the nuance and complexity that comes with building a moral society, teaching us that a society cannot thrive on laws alone. While laws may provide structure, empathy and compassion are what breathe life into that structure. We, as the Jewish people, are commanded not only to follow the rules, but to embody the values behind them, treating every person, regardless of their status or background, with dignity and respect.

THE POWER OF "AND"

Raquel Cohen '26

"ואלה המשפטים—*And these are the ordinances*." This is the opening line of this week's *parsha*. At first glance, it seems odd that the Torah begins with the word "and." In English, starting a sentence with "and" is often considered improper, especially as the first word of an entire section. However, we know that nothing in the Torah is extra—every word, every letter, every phrase carries meaning.

The conjunction "and" teaches us that this *parsha* is directly connected to the previous one, *Parshat Yitro*, in which the Torah was given at *Har Sinai*. This teaches us that just as the *Aseret Hadibrot* were given at *Har Sinai* in *Parshat Yitro*, so too were the civil laws of *Parshat Mishpatim*.

However, wouldn't we already assume that all of the Torah comes from Sinai?

Unfortunately, human nature makes it easy for us to rationalize and separate certain commandments from others.We tend to view religious *Mitzvot—Shabbat, kosher, tefillin*—as concrete and untouchable, yet when it comes to laws that govern our interpersonal relationships—honesty in business, respecting parents, refraining from gossip—we often decide for ourselves what is justifiable. We tell ourselves, "It's just a small lie," or "Everyone does it," but the Torah reminds us that morality is not subjective; it is determined by Hashem alone.

The "and" in this *parsha* emphasizes that ethical laws, just like religious laws, are divine and non-negotiable, a message that is incredibly relevant today. Society's definition of goodness constantly changes. What was once considered moral may no longer be, and vice versa. Every culture has its own idea of what it means to be a "good person."

However, the Torah does not command us to simply be "good"—a term too vague to be meaningful. Instead, it gives us a precise framework for ethical living, directly from the wisdom of Hashem.

The laws given at *Har Sinai* are not based on trends or personal feelings; they are immutable and guide us in every aspect of life, from how we pray to how we treat one another.

FROM SLAVES TO SERVANTS

Elan Harris '25

Receiving the Ten Commandments may have been the pinnacle of the Jewish experience, but by no means did Judaism end there. In this week's *parsha*, the Torah details a variety of laws, which include wrongful acts and damage law, as well as the laws of physical injury and impairment compensation. A nation that has just emerged from a brutal enslavement surely needs a strict code to discipline their freedom. However, the order of the laws that are given this week seems odd.

The first commandments, in a set of more than 50 intricate laws detailing almost every aspect of life's complexities, concern the laws of service. *Parshat Mishpatim* begins with the words, "when you will acquire a Jewish servant, he shall serve six years and on the seventh he shall go free." (Exodus 16-1) This is surprising. The Jews just spent the last 210 years as slaves. Why would

they even entertain thoughts of taking servants? Shouldn't the first laws dictate compassion for other humans, thus enforcing total equality of an entire, newly liberated nation? Of all the laws dictated to a newly liberated people, shouldn't the concepts of masters and servants be loath to them? Why are those laws given first?

The Torah understands the Jewish nation's feelings toward its own experience. Slavery is hated and especially unenjoyable to the Jewish community. The impact of that experience could have shaped an unhealthy attitude toward slavery even in a humane and benevolent environment. Therefore, the Torah immediately directed its very humanitarian laws of servitude — clearly and openly. Six years of service and no more. A servant can never be humiliated or degraded. In fact, the rules of Jewish servitude are so humane that the *Talmud* concludes that "whoever owns a servant has actually acquired a master."

Ultimately, in an imperfect world there are imperfect situations. People steal. They owe money. They must work for others to pay off debt or money they have swindled. But when the problems and injustices of life are dealt with in a Torah way, the imperfect world can get a little closer to perfection.

LISTENING, NOT JUST HEARING

Rabbi Eli Zians

At the end of six years of work, all Jewish servants go free from their masters. (A Jew becomes a servant either by selling himself because he is destitute or through being sold by *Bais Din* [the Court] as a punishment for stealing and being unable to repay what he stole.) If a Jewish servant does not want to leave his master at the end of the six years, he is taken to the door post and his master bores a hole through his ear. He then remains in servitude.

The *Gemara* [Kiddushin 22b] tells us the significance of the fact that it is specifically his ear that is pierced: "The ear that heard on *Sinai* 'you are to be slaves to Me' and nevertheless chose to sell himself into slavery (acquiring a different master for himself) and then chose to remain in servitude when he had the opportunity to go free is deserving of punishment."

The Gerrer Rebbe (Sefas Emes) protests that it is not really the ear's fault; it is the brain's fault! The ear is just a receptacle, a tool for hearing sounds. In fact, it is his brain or perhaps his heart that is at fault. That is the part of him that fails to realize to whom he is supposed to be a slave. Why pick on the ear?

The *Sefas Emes* answers that it is the ear's fault, because the message remained only in the ear. The trouble with this person is that he heard -- externally; but he did not listen. He did not internalize the message "They shall be slaves to Me; not slaves to other slaves". That was his sin, it remained only in the ear. In one ear, out the other.

Rav Michel Twerski, an incredible Rabbi and a fantastic psychologist, said that he has noticed a very interesting phenomenon. Patients who are receiving therapy can often discuss a problem and come up with a solution to the problem. However, many just can't implement the solution. They hear what needs to be done, but they don't listen. They don't internalize it. Rav Michel Twerski commented that we have become a spectator society. People, unfortunately, watch so much theater, so many movies and so much television, that their lives become soap operas. People become 'just spectators' to their own lives. Therefore, they cannot act to improve their lives and to change what is going on in their lives any more than they can act to change what is going on in the movies or the soap operas. Don't be a spectator, be the change you want to see in the world! May we all have the strength and courage to listen, absorb the message and implement the change we want to see within ourselves!

שבת שלום!

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