


CHABAD

RESEARCH UNIT

שבת..... *for Friday nights*..... קדש


Friday 17 February 2012 - 24 Shevat 5772
Sedra Mishpatim

UNDERSTANDING AND BEYOND

THE NAME OF THE SEDRA IS NEVER A MATTER OF CHANCE. It always in some way describes the main contents and theme. Our Sedra¹ is called Mishpatim, a word which means “Judgements”, civil and criminal laws. These are the laws which, unlike Statutes, Chukim, can be understood by human reason, and have the obvious effect of maintaining wholesomeness in human relationships.

The basic laws discussed in the Sedra include paying damages and compensation for harm caused to other persons and property, and the punishing of crimes of murder, manslaughter, kidnapping and theft. All societies have similar concepts on their legal code.

Since the Sedra contains many laws of this rational kind, one can understand why it is called Mishpatim, rational judgements. But the Sedra also deals with a number of Chukim, Statutes. These are laws which are not readily explained by logic, such as the command not to mix milk and meat². These laws are regarded as being beyond human reason. Given that everything in the Torah is absolutely precise, why have such laws also been included in a Sedra called Mishpatim, Judgements?



In Memory of Rebbetzin Chaya Mushka Schneerson ז"ע
Yahrzeit 22 Shevat – May her Memory be for a Blessing

One implication is that Statutes too have to be thought about and understood, to the full extent of our ability. They are included in the Sedra Mishpatim to emphasise that just as we can understand Judgements, so we have a duty to try to understand Statutes, even though we think of them as being beyond human reason.

The advantage of this approach can be understood by personal experience. We have surely noticed that we identify with that which is familiar and understood. It is very hard to muster enthusiasm for a dry order or command. If the teacher in a class explains why he or she has issued a rule, it is far more likely that it will be carried properly and with commitment.

The difference is summarised in a statement in Sedra Beshalach: “This is my G-d and I shall make a dwelling for Him; the G-d of my father and I will exalt Him.”³

When one’s approach to the Torah is based on the feeling that “This is my G-d”, the One with whom I myself identify, understand and enthuse over, then I can make a dwelling for Him in my life. If, however, He is merely the G-d of my father, whose teachings I do not understand, but am merely “carry on the tradition” without really thinking about it, then my Divine service is likely to be one of polite but possibly cool respect: I shall exalt G-d, I will say that He is very great. But this may not prevent me from feeling remote from Him.

Hence it is important for a person to try to understand as much as he or she can about the laws of the Torah. Many questions about the meaning of Jewish law are answered in Chassidic teachings and in works such as Tanya, by Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi.

Then comes another step. When we have understood as much as we can with our human minds, we go higher than understanding. We realise that rational understanding, in itself, is fickle, and unreliable as a guide to life. We need Divine guidance at every step. We see that, ultimately, *all* aspects of Torah – both the Statutes, and the Mishpatim, the ‘rational’ teachings - come from Infinite G-d. We pledge ourselves to keep the seemingly rational laws of human conduct not just because they seem reasonable but because they link us with the infinite Divine⁴.

1. Exodus chs.21-24. 2. Exodus 19:23. 3. Exodus 15:2. 4. Based freely on the Lubavitcher Rebbe’s *Likkutei Sichot* Vol. 16 pp.242-50.

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SEDRA MISHPATIM

DONKEYS AND CARS

Tamara and Daniel Levy, together with their mother, had just come out of the shopping centre and were walking to their car.

'Race you!' shouted Daniel to Tamara. 'Ok!' said Tamara gleefully, as she sped off. They both got to the car panting and out of breath, their mother was still far behind. 'I love this sweater Mummy bought me today!' Tamara said, taking it out of its bag; she couldn't wait to wear it to school.

'Yes,' said Daniel, 'I'm glad you found it'. He had also got new clothes: a pair of trousers and some shirts.

Finally, they got everything in the car and were on their way out of the car park. 'We have to get home soon', said their mother to Tamara, 'you have a piano lesson today'. 'Yes', said Tamara, looking at her watch, 'it's at 6:30, we still have an hour to go'.

'Mummy', said Daniel, 'I think we need some petrol'. He pointed to the gauge on the dashboard. 'Oh my! You're right!' she replied. They turned into the next petrol station they passed. Their mother got out of the car to fill up. 'Oh look over there!' Tamara said, pointing to the other side of the empty forecourt, 'there is someone who has broken down!'

'Oh yes, you're right!' Daniel said. The bonnet was open and a woman was looking at the engine of her car with a worried

look on her face. It was Sunday afternoon, The petrol station was selling petrol, but there was no-one who could help fix the car.

‘Maybe we should help her out’, Daniel said. ‘What could we do?’ asked Tamara. ‘And anyway’ she continued, thinking of her piano lesson, ‘we have to get home soon’.

When their mother returned the two children pointed out the car which had broken down. At once their mother drove to the other side of the forecourt to see if she could help. ‘But Mummy,’ complained Tamara, ‘we have to get home very soon or I’ll be late for the lesson!’

‘Don’t worry’, said her mother. ‘Anyway, didn’t you learn about this in the Sedra this week?’ ‘No’, replied Tamara, puzzled. ‘Okay, I’ll explain when we finish trying to help this lady’, said her mother and she got out the car.

At first the woman’s car would not start. However, with some manoeuvring of the Levy’s car and the help of both children they managed to connect the batteries of the two cars and the engine burst into life. The woman thanked them warmly and drove off with a smile.

‘So, what does it say in this week’s Torah portion about this?’ Tamara asked as they drove out of the station. ‘Well,’ said her mother, ‘the Torah talks about many things this week, and one of them is that if you see someone’s donkey which has fallen down under its load, then you should stop to help’.

‘Oh yes!’ Daniel said, ‘we learned about that in class!’ ‘Ok,’ said Tamara, ‘since we helped someone in trouble, like the Torah says, it doesn’t matter if I’m late for my piano lesson.’

‘Well, you don’t have to worry about that! We’re nearly home...’ said her mother. They were indeed just in time, and they had managed to help a person with a modern form of donkey which had fallen down and could not move forward.

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