

Mishpatim 5782

Routines and Rituals and Boundaries

We might like to think of Mishpatim as following the Zen proverb, “After enlightenment...the laundry.” The parashah covers the 40 days after the revelation at Mount Sinai. Moses leaves the people and goes back up the mountain to receive the first legal and moral code of the Torah, to address the way that we should live day by day.

I talked last week with Josh Lichtman about the part of the Torah he read - the stunning scene with a mountain on fire and the voice of the Holy One resounding for all to hear. But what should the people do on the morning after? How does revelation turn into sustainable living?

Often when I work with Jews by choice, we talk about how Judaism has an exoskeleton. Our deepest spiritual experiences - when we ourselves experience enlightenment or revelation - are amazing, but they don't serve well as a basis for everyday practice. For that, we need a system - something more solid and serviceable. Thus, Judaism carves up time, creates rules for our relationships with our environment and each other and sets up a system within which we can be stable. With that system in place, we can more safely adventure into the purely spiritual.

And with a stable system, we are better equipped to deal with disruptions. There's a TED talk by New York author, psychotherapist and organizational consultant Esther Perel that addresses this specifically in light of the pandemic. She says:

So what are some of the things that people can do once we understand stress in this way is to create routines and rituals and boundaries. Routines to separate the different activities, the different roles and responsibilities that we inhabit, rituals because they create sacred time and sacred space and boundaries, because they create delineation, demarcation, borders, and those are really necessary for us to experience a sense of groundedness and structure.

And the second thing that really helps with stress as well is actually to create space for Eros. There's a reason people at this moment are seeing plants grow, seeing bread rise, creating things, making things out of nothing. Because when you see life emerge in front of you or something change in front of you, it functions as an antidote to deadness and to stress.¹

Routines, rituals and boundaries. If we read Mishpatim through this lens, we see those themes emerge for the first time for the Israelites. The first sacred calendar of the Torah is contained in this parashah, regulating time over the course of a year. The parashah opens with a ritual - the piercing of the ear of a slave who wishes to remain enslaved rather than go free, and it ends with other rituals - sacrifices, communal eating. And boundaries are set in every aspect of society - the death penalty for violence of multiple types, rules that regulate the payment of damages - including for when a person lets out their livestock or lights a fire that spreads into neighboring land (boundaries again). Rabbi Bradley Shavit Artson writes of this parashah that it is marked by the setting of limits, including the term of slavery to a father's rights over his daughter and the establishing of Shabbat.²

And once those boundaries are safely in place, there is the opportunity for what Perel calls Eros and what I will call spiritual practice - the joy that we find in creativity, contemplation and gratitude that feeds our inner selves and keeps us connected and strong.

Not all of this translates into our practices as Jews today, of course. But the biggest contours - the managing of time and the system of rights and obligations to each other - are still in place. We live by the Jewish calendar and we observe community etiquette when we come together – even when the systems get disrupted.

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https://www.ted.com/talks/esther_perel_the_routines_rituals_and_boundaries_we_need_in_stressful_times?utm_source=facebook.com&utm_medium=social&utm_campaign=social&utm_term=2022-01-20-esther_perel&utm_content=2022-01-20&fbclid=IwAR1Svd-3yLYEj9P45CuO1kVj-2uZxYjMrMT3iz0clobWhGbT5tk3GPfjb_8

² https://hazon.org/mishpatim-shmita-by-rabbi-dr-bradley-shavit-artson/?utm_source=newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=shmita_weekly&eType=EmailBlastContent&eId=88cab562-341b-4651-b681-ba2b55d9f463

Even with the pandemic, we have still managed to observe Jewish time - be it on Zoom, in person or hybrid, sometimes without being in the same state, let alone the same city. We have mined our tradition to establish the rules by which we interact so as to honor each other's integrity and keep each other safe. We have probably also set other boundaries in our lives - limits on Zoom, on answering emails, on Netflix - so as to preserve some precious space for - as Esther Perel said before, *seeing plants grow, seeing bread rise, creating things, making things out of nothing*. The exoskeleton is still doing what it's supposed to do.

And yet. In only a couple of weeks, the Torah is going to teach us that system alone is not enough for human beings. Here's Esther Perel again:

Carving out a special sacred space, physical space to delineate the separations, I think at this point is extremely important. That involves, you know, even changing clothes. We are usually very localized people and we change, we move to another place. We have a ritual of preparing the things that we need to put in our bag, to go to the gym, to go to the restaurant, to go to see friends or family. None of these markers are currently there to give us that embodied sense of experience. We are exhausted, basically. We use the word a lot, but we don't always attribute exactly where that exhaustion is coming from and it comes from the loss of these delineations and demarcations, these boundaries that are very, very grounding to us.³

This isn't the language of Mishpatim. Rather, this is the language of the Mishkan, of physical actions and physical space. Without those, as Perel observes, we become exhausted - as exhausted as the Israelites at the foot of the mountain waiting for Moses to come back down. And we all know how that turned out.

So Mishpatim is only one part of our evolution into a people.

We are being reminded that Torah works in layers. Revelation/system/space. Mountain/morals/Mishkan.

And if you want to find out more about layers that come in threes, be sure to tune in next week.

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[https://www.ted.com/talks/esther_perel_the_routines_rituals_and_boundaries_we_need_in_stressful_time
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