



Parashat Mishpatim: Those With Spines and Those With Shells

Dear Friends,

If you love law, you'll love Parashat Mishpatim (mishpatim means laws!). It comes immediately following God's revelation at Mt. Sinai, and it is basically a legal and procedural expansion of the Ten Commandments. The Parsha is full of amazing laws, such as protecting the rights of slaves and guaranteeing their eventual freedom; protection of the weaker members of society - the widow, the orphan and the day laborer; the requirement to revere the legal system; safeguarding parental authority; protecting livestock and property from a neighbor's belligerent ox, and more.

Ever since I can remember, I have had mixed feelings about laws. On the one hand, they gave me a sense of protection. On the other hand, an inner voice always sought to challenge every law and clarify its reason: What is it there for? What is its source? Whose interest does it serve? What need does it answer? What do laws say about us as human beings?

During the five years of intensive learning for the rabbinate, of all of the many and varied topics we learned, I especially enjoyed studying Halacha. More than a lively debate about a Talmudic Suggiya, I liked studying the four volumes of "Shulchan Aruch" which lays down the bottom line of do's and don'ts, forbidden and permissible.

It took me many years to understand what drew me to Halacha, and excited me so much about its study. It is not very typical of me to prefer the order of the law over philosophical and theological discussions.

I discovered that there is something in the halachic discourse that calms, anchors, and connects me.

But to what? It isn't as though my starting point was lawlessness. I did not need the authority of more rules. On the contrary! I came from a place where rules and norms were very much at the core.

Quite a few years have gone by since I entered the world of Torah. I have matured. Grey hairs and wrinkles tell me I've aged. Now, when Parashat Mishpatim and other similar

law-centered Parashot appear, I noticed that not only has my body matured, so has my soul. Indeed, I already understand a thing or two.

Many years ago, during a visit to Boulder, Colorado, I had the opportunity of hearing a Torah lesson from the dear, elderly Rabbi Zalman Schechter-Shlomi, z"l. He explained how all of us are on a continuum, which he called "those with shells and those with spines". On one end of the continuum are those who seek external protection, i.e. a solid shell or covering. Those on this end are creatures that are very soft and vulnerable, or feel themselves to be so. On the other end of the continuum are those with spines, who seek to strengthen, perhaps even soften, them. Their core needs strengthening, but they enjoy being exposed to air and wind; their limbs moving freely in the world. The old rabbi asked the group sitting there - a group of young rabbis of all denominations - where we were on the continuum. Did we feel ourselves to be tender and vulnerable and in need of tough external shield, or did we have a spine which needed strengthening and flexing so that our body could move with greater ease?

Our understanding of the Halacha, he explained, will be different for each person, depending on where they are on the continuum. The "tender" person may feel the need for a tough exterior to protect him from the world and even from himself, and he will find in the Halacha a way of life which will do just that: an external shield, a fence made out of values and solid advice, which will guard him from the temptations and dangers of the world around him.

A person who seeks to strengthen and flex his spine will find valuable and lofty principles in the Halacha which will provide an anchor for his life and allow him the freedom and flexibility he desires. For him the Halacha is like an inner compass on the journey of life, which will enrich his world from within.

Rabbi Shechter-Shlomi, z"l, gravitated more towards the latter kind of Halachic seeking, the kind with the spine, but he also understood the needs of those who prefer shells. Many new-comers to the Halachic fold are pulled in precisely because of their need to enforce order in their chaotic world. Halacha offers a lofty system which will set boundaries and provide them with a healthy environment in which to grow, flourish, and connect. It is the "old-timers" in the world of Halacha, those who grew up in the world of clear limits and boundaries, who often gravitate towards the spine-based Halacha.

I, too, was a new-comer to the world of Halacha. I grew up in the secular world and was deeply drawn towards the world of Torah. I was intoxicated by words such as "these are the laws" - the opening line of our parasha. But for me, this pull did not come from a chaotic world. I never led a wild lifestyle, therefore I did not need an external shell. I had that in buckets... I grew up in a very ethical, structured, and well-defined society (kibbutz). But like many ba'alei tshuva, I had - and still have - a deep longing for a spiritual anchor, for a dynamic, living, breathing internal compass which is calibrated towards the exalted, towards the eternal. Don't misunderstand me: the compass which guided my youth was a very worthy one. It was calibrated towards social norms, filled with societal and communal do's and don'ts, and I am very grateful for that. Still, something within me sought what I felt to be

a deeper and higher anchor, one that is connected to the infinite root of creation and directed towards the eternal.

I do not consider Halacha to be an external system that seeks to impose do's and don'ts upon us in order for us to "behave!", but rather an inner "moral" system that comes from the depth, and seeks to keep us connected to the deep springs of "life-giving water" - the formless from which all form arises - from which healthy boundaries arise. These well-rooted boundaries allow us the inner freedom to engage in the magic of the creative journey.

As God has done - from formless to fresh form.

And you? Where are you on the continuum?

Shabbat Shalom,

Elisha