

Mishpatim (Laws)
Ex 21:1-24:18

Temple Sinai
18 February 2012
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In Parshat Mishpatim, detailed laws are set down to supplement the Ten Commandments. The Israelites insist that Moses speak with God on their behalf so they do not feel the terror of the Divine Presence. They insist that they will do first and hear the details of the Law later. Eventually Moses brings up Joshua and the Elders for a more intimate experience of God. The Israelites are left with a code of ritual, civil and criminal rules to follow in order to uphold their part of the b'rit, the holy covenant with God.

Introduction

Parshat Mishpatim renders the Sinai covenant operational through mitzvot, or commandments. There are both civil and criminal commandments. We learn that the Israelites are chastened by their betrayal of God through building the idol of the Golden Calf, but commit to fulfilling God's Word even before they fully comprehend its requirements:

"We will do and we will hear." "Na'aseh ve-nishma" [Ex. 24:7] We will do and we will hear. This is what the Israelites said in unison, agreeing to commit themselves to the laws of the covenant, after Moses read them aloud to the people.

They had previously witnessed the awesomeness of God in thunder and lightening and with the blare of the horn from the smoking mountain, and they, recoiled. They asked Moses to be their intermediary.

And they were still fully enraptured by awe as Moses spoke God's commandments and they exclaimed, "Yes! We will do." The idea of hearing comes after the initial "yes, we will do".

What is this hearing? What is this dawning understanding of what they have committed to?

Then, of course, there follows the struggle to live up to the commitment. Moses will ascend the mountain on their behalf, and be enveloped in the cloud on the mountain top. Aaron and his sons, and seventy elders go up with Moses, half way, and beheld God, ate and drank. Moses continues up the mountain and by the time Moses comes down from the mountain in the next portion, these same people, with Aaron who also ascended half way up the mountain, these Israelites will have created the Golden Calf.

This is our cycle from Sabbath to Sabbath, from new year to new year, from day to day, we say “yes” to the ideal, we say “yes” to rising of the nobility of our spirit, and we move into a deeper understanding of those ideals through the struggle with our own natures on increasingly subtle levels. Then, always, we fall back and lose our way, only to work to return, over and over again. That is our journey out of the desert on our return to Eden. And we are in this together.

This will be a contemplation in three parts, drawing upon the Zohar, the Sefat Emet and the writing of Avivah Zornberg. This is an odd form. We have sat in silence for the last hour, creating a little Sabbath openness and receptivity. What I hope to do here is to drop in some words of Torah into that silence and let them move around in you. Do not try to grasp them. The words do their best work when they seek a home in you, resonating if they fit and just flowing through if there is no receptor site.

A metaphor: a friend was explaining bone marrow transplants to me. He said that the donor bone marrow is injected into a recipient’s blood stream and the donated bone marrow finds its way to the interior of the bone all on its own. Truly remarkable. So, as a metaphor, I will put out these words into the space we share this Shabbat afternoon, and if they are bone marrow to you, the words will find a home within your bones. There is nothing you need to do. Simply sitting here, letting the mind do what it needs to do.

The first part of the contemplation we will contemplate our commitment to doing and listening. The second part is about our rising to holiness, becoming a people of holiness, through our deeds and attitudes. And the third section is our ascent up the mountain with Moses, only to start the cycle all over again.

Niggun

Part I

We will do and we will hear. Remembering a time when you made a commitment to a value or a project. “Yes!” you said to the possibility without knowing the implications. How could you know, because you never embarked upon this path before, never tried to attach yourself to this idea before. A marriage, an education, having children, going on a journey, starting a new form of work or hobby. Yes, you say to the idea and embark into the unknown. You can not know what you have gotten yourself into until you are well on your way, and still the meaning of the commitment unfolds without end.

We will do and we will hear. The understanding only comes after we begin.

From Reb Nachman:

“Na’asen”, “We shall do” refers to the revealed—that is, to the commandments one can fulfill, on one’s own level. “Nishma”, “We shall hear”—refers to the hidden—that is, to the things one can not grasp. For around each commandment, there are other things, which belong to the class of the hidden. The commandment itself one can fulfill; but the spiritual work that surrounds the commandment is largely unknown, hidden.”

[Zornberg, The Particulars of Rapture, p. 311]

We say yes, to choose a path, and we listen deeply to walk the path, toward understanding, toward wisdom.

From Sefat Emet:

“The destiny of the Jewish people lies precisely in their openness to the continued revelation of the not yet revealed. The already-revealed is to be obeyed; but beyond that, and closer to the heart of the spiritual life, is the constant quest indicated by the “nishma”—“We shall hear.”

[Zornberg, p. 308]

And we do this for the sake of heaven.

[Sefat Emet, The Language of Truth, p. 112]

This is a continual process of revelation, a continual process of unveiling. What is hidden becomes revealed, and yet another deeper layer of hidden-ness rises to be uncovered. We keep listening to understand on a perpetually deeper level, without end.

And hearing is a “function of the heart, as in Solomon’s prayer: Give your servant a hearing heart.” And the heart expresses itself to God in prayer.

[Zornberg, p. 311]

And we pray for a hearing heart.

Chant: Grant your servant a hearing heart (1 Kings 3:9)

Silence

Part II

From the Zohar, the process of revelation:

Wisdom flows from Nothingness. The Holy of Holies.
Torah emerged from Wisdom, from a place called Holiness.
Zion and Jerusalem are Holy.

We are a people of Holiness.
[Zohar, D. Matt translator, Vol 5, p. 140]

From the Sefat Emet:

“You shall be a people of holiness unto Me.” [Exodus 22:30] The guarding of holiness has to be within the realm of human deeds and activities.”
[Sefat Emet, p. 114]

What is our honorable struggle to raise ourselves to holiness? Let’s bring this process to light, our own constant renewal, the effort to refine our humanity, as we live in community. The mundane gets raised to Holiness--in speech, in how we eat, and in our own attitudes towards ourselves and each other.

These are examples you can use, or construct your own.

I, we, you make a commitment to speak well, without gossip or malice. We say yes to this. It is an easy yes.

And we image our selves living up to this ideal. What does it entail?

We can remember our falling short. We can know how we fall short in our speech to others and to ourselves.

We can recognize the work we have done toward the ideal. We can take this understanding to heart. And hear our prayer of our heart. And again say yes to the ideal.

I, we, you, can make a commitment to eat consciously, making good choices that respect our bodies and the earth and remembering gratitude and from where the food came.

We remember the blessing of food, the holiness of food.

We can say yes to this commitment quite easily, and yet know our periodic struggle for integrity to this commitment.

And know that we celebrate nourishment and nourishment is a communion. And yearning for health and communion is a prayer of our heart.

And again say yes to the ideal.

I, we, you, make a commitment to pair judgment with mercy. This is an ideal that is noble.

We can say yes to this. And we can image our living up to this ideal. What does that entail?

We can know the predictable ways we fall short, how we harshly judge others and our self. We can know we have done work toward this ideal. We can take this understanding to heart and know that there is much unknown to us about the work that lies ahead as this path unfolds. Here is our prayer and we once again say yes to the ideal.

How do we live our values. How do we live the commandments we have taken on, with our hearts, with our bodies and limbs, in our actions. What do I raise to Holiness?

Remembering the Holiness that is already present on the Shabbat, here, now, hidden, to be revealed in the core of our being, the inner light and spirit, the radiance of Moses on the mountain. The inner Torah, the root of the commandments is within our limbs.

Chant: You will be Holy for I am holy.

Silence

Part III

From Sefat Emet:

“Now it says: Come up to Me upon the mountain and *be* there.” [Ex 24:12] This means that Moses was transformed into a new being, like one of the ministering angels. The Zohar says that ‘be there’ (sham) can be read as ‘be a name’ (shem), meaning that Moses became the Holy Name.

All of Israel have a part in that form. Before the sin [of the golden calf] it says: “I said ‘You are God.’” (ps. 82:6) And it is taught that on the holy Sabbath Moses restores that light to every Jew. “

[Sefat Emet, p. 113]

From the Zohar:

“Moses alone shall come near YHVH [Ex. 24:2] Happy is the share of Moses, for he alone attained what no other human attained! Israel now attained what they had not attained until that moment. At that moment, they were established in supernal holy existence. At that moment, they became worthy of having the

sanctuary in their midst, as it is written: "Have them make Me a sanctuary, and I will dwell among them." [Ex 25:8]"

[Zohar, Vol 5, Matt translator, p. 179]

Before Moses ascended into the Cloud, Moses and Aaron and his sons ascended part way, and "And beneath His feet was a fashioning of sapphire pavement [Ex. 24:10] appearing like the precious stone with which the blessed Holy One intends to build the Temple..."

...And they ate and they drank [Ex 24:11] feasting on this radiance.

....They actually ate, nourishing themselves. Here they became worthy...

At that time, even Israel became worthy...This covenant and Torah all happened at once..."

[Zohar, Vol 5, Matt translator, pp. 181-2]

And that moment of communion is also eternally present, now, hidden.

Chant: Come up to Me into the mount and be there (Exodus 24:12)

"We are participants in Moses' journey, not mere followers who stood at the mountain's base and waited for him to return.

We bask in Moses' radiance, now.

Yet we are also those who stood at the base of the mountain—impatient, childish, frightened, worshipping the Golden Calf, blocking our own transformation. Both of the selves are present within us."

[Art Green commentary on the Sefat Emet, p. 114]

I will do, and I will listen in perpetual cycle as we do our work to know the Holiness of us all.

Silence

Niggun

