

Mishpatim – 5782

At some point in my becoming more interested in Torah study and began to struggle with the interpretation and understanding of the Five Books of Moses, I remember reading that one way of understanding the specific meanings of the words requires one to look forward and back in the parshiot to textualize precisely what is happening and being imparted to us. Even though many Torah scholars would argue that the order we read the parshiot today is not necessarily the way they were originally or even codified at one time, we have to see them the way they are now and derive our understanding from that order.

In this case, as I pointed out last week, in many ways we can see the crescendo of events leading up to the opening of Mishpatim, this week's parsha, as a climax of sorts. We can go back to Bo in which the last plagues occur and Pharaoh lets his Israelite slaves go under the leadership of Moses. This huge collection of slaves come up against the waters of the Sea of Reeds in Parshat Beshalach and Moses leads the Children of Israel between two walls of water which close behind them and swallow the Egyptians immediately creating the nation of Israel, the soon to be Jewish people. Then, after reuniting with his family brought to him by Yitro and following the advice of his father-in-law to delegate the authority of being the sole judge of his people to others, the newly created nation is led to Sinai where they receive Aseret HaDibrot, the Ten Commandments.

In this week's Parsha, we are told that the people heard the laws we read this week and willingly and unanimously accepted them as part of their contract with HaShem. But what exactly are these first group of laws that are presented to us in Mishpatim, which is the Hebrew word for laws? We

soon realize with shock that they deal with the obligations owed to slaves and to injured parties, to strangers and murderers and kidnappers. You would not be the only ones to wonder how come we are presented with these first. In order to understand, we need to remember where they have just come from these children of Israel, these former slaves and what kind of a society not only Egypt was, but the entire neighbourhood they inhabited and what the other peoples of the Near East were like. Life was brutal and short and marked by societies where power was everything. True enough, the Children of Israel left behind a country totally destroyed by their exit and the drowning in the Red Sea. WE know it wouldn't take them long to restore what once was, but we also know from history and archeology and anthropology that it didn't change much. There were still the powerful and the powerless and the cards were stacked against the powerless.

But we already know from the words delivered by HaShem to Moshe and later expanded upon and built upon that we were meant to be a holy and just nation held together by our identity with and the acceptance of the covenant with HaShem. But where is that here in Mishpatim? Instead, we are told how to treat one another no matter w or what we have done. Centuries later, the sage, scholar, Mishnaist, Talmudist and founder of the House of Hillel drew attention to Verse 18 in Leviticus, Chapter 19 where we are commanded to Love Thy Neighbour as thyself. He later expanded this to the saying If I am not for myself than who will be for me and if I am only for myself than what am I?

What we are being taught and commanded to do in Mishpatim more than anything else, it seems to me, is to find it in ourselves to be empathetic in our approach to the world. We have to be able to look at the world through the eyes of the other. Isn't that what started Moses on his path to being

Moshe Rabeinu? He saw injustice in the way in which a slave was being treated and he reacted to right that wrong. Isn't that what we are supposed to do when we are commanded to retell the story of the Exodus as if we were there ourselves? Isn't that what we are supposed to do when we are to understand that we ourselves were at Mount Sinai and accepted the charge of HaShem to be a chosen people and pursue justice for each and every living creature. That response to the world which is such a deep seated and rooted part of our culture and ethos as Jews is what leads so many of us to participate in movements like the Civil Rights movement in the U. S., the Anti-Apartheid movement in South Africa, the fight against injustices in the world even today.

Most of you know that in my last career I was a teacher of future teachers, and in that program I worked within, we tried to emphasize with our students, these future classroom teachers, that nothing was more important than the way we treated each other and our students. I personally always talked about trying to see the world through their eyes, trying to in other words, do unto others as we would have them do unto us. I always maintained then and still maintain to this day, that being empathetic not only makes us better teachers but also makes us better leaders and better individuals. For you this morning, I can point back to Parshat Mishpatim as one of the sources for that belief and for those actions. Being able to be for ourselves but ALSO for the other leads directly to justice and the fulfillment of the idea of Tikkun Olam, the repairing of the world. Never forget though that it always begins with one, with you and me, with us. Through us, Hillel and his words of wisdom live on today making the world better for all of us.