

A Life of Mitzvah

To this point in the Torah, there have been very few instructions about how the daily life of the Jew is to be governed. The list of laws given to Israel in Egypt all pertained to Passover. It made sense to list the commandments that will help perpetuate the redemption narrative many generations into the future.

The Ten Commandments are archetypal commands. We see a replay and review in Leviticus and Deuteronomy of the principles enumerated in the Ten Commandments. But you could not easily look at those Ten and know how to live life. This Shabbat, we begin, in earnest, to appreciate the legal dimension of Judaism. Our portion this Shabbat, *Mishpatim*, details the intricate socio-economic workings of a religious community. This notion, in and of itself, is astounding: God's vision of a 'Holy nation,' cannot be defined as a nation committed to stereotypic holiness; where holiness is defined by detachment. The holy masters are often the most aloof from matters of man. [This strain is evident in Jewish life; Rashi's famous comment on Leviticus 19:2 'you shall be holy' means you shall be separate. Even there, however, separation is more about boundary-setting than detachment.]

The holy life in the Torah's vision for the Jewish people was to be a people instructed, given direction, following the *Halacha* – the path – of Jewish legal practice. As a teacher of mine remarked, the job of the Jew is to get your hands dirty. Life's a mess and we are tasked to wade through it, clean it up and leave the world better than when we found it – *Letaken Olam*. Our leaders, the legalists, are people who ought to be the living embodiment of devotion, setting the course and guiding others as they walk the path. Civic life is a holy life. The Talmud explains the link between the last portion, relating to the altar, and this portion, about the judges – the Torah is teaching us to place the court on the Temple grounds. (JT Makkot 2:6)

The common problem that arises from an intricate legal system is the feeling that the law misses the spirit. Spiritual masters from the dawn of the Chasidic age – notably, the Ba'al Shem Tov and the Kutzker Rebbe – warned of the devotion to Halacha at the cost of devotion to God. Or, in a more famous iteration, you can keep every law in the codes and still not practice Judaism.

The concern of finding the spiritual, intellectual or social reason, laying at the core of the commandment spawned a large body of rabbinic literature called *Taamei Hamitzvot* – the reasons for the commandments. These books, penned by some of our greatest rabbinic sages, straddled a fine line: Meaning versus Mitzvah. The mitzvah, by nature, is a commandment; God gave us these commands for us to observe, regardless of the meaning we invest into them. The Israeli philosopher, Yeshayahu Leibowitz, refused to offer rationale for commandments; he, instead, focused on the importance of Mitzvah as a tool for living a Jewish life. The danger would arise when human construction for meaning became outdated or fell out of fashion – for instance, what happens if medical research announces that circumcision is unhealthy? – then the Mitzvah may be dropped.

However, robotic practice and blind acceptance cannot be our religious standard. The rabbinic reading of the opening words of our portion, *Mishpatim*: 'These are the statutes which you shall place before them' (Exodus 21:1) insist that we set the words of Torah like a Shulchan Aruch, like a set table, before students. (See the opening comments by the Mechilta to this portion) If we convey ideas from Torah in a clear way, we trust students to discover eternal truth.

Shabbat Shalom Umevroach,
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