

TORAHSCOPE: Mishpatim (Rulings, Judgments, Ordinances)

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Exodus 21:1-24:18
Jeremiah 46:13-28

"Rules Unto Others"

"Then he took the book of the covenant and read *it* in the hearing of the people; and they said, 'All that the LORD has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient!' So Moses took the blood and sprinkled *it* on the people, and said, 'Behold the blood of the covenant, which the LORD has made with you in accordance with all these words'" (Exodus 24:7-8).

As we turn to *Mishpatim* this week, we are reminded that the Israelites have just received the Ten Commandments and have heard the terrifying voice of the Lord as He shook Mount Sinai. We recall that the Israelites were so frightened by the sound of God's voice, that they requested that Moses be their exclusive intermediary to receive the further instructions about how to conduct their lives. As they trembled at a distance, the fear was so great that they thought they would die if they had to continue to hear the voice of the Almighty:

"And all the people perceived the thunder and the lightning flashes and the sound of the trumpet and the mountain smoking; and when the people saw *it*, they trembled and stood at a distance. Then they said to Moses, 'Speak to us yourself and we will listen; but let not God speak to us, lest we die'" (Exodus 20:18-19).

Apparently, the presence of God was so awesome that the Israelites relinquished their individual right to hear Him directly, by choosing to let Moses be their intermediary. In that capacity, Moses then receives instructions about how men and women should conduct their lives with respect toward one another. In many ways, as you read this list of rules, ordinances, and judgments, the thought comes to mind that these practical instructions are quite consistent with what we often call "the Golden Rule," treating others as we would have them treat us. Reading through the portion entitled *Mishpatim*, "Ordinances" or "Rulings," gives us the annual opportunity to rethink many of the basic instructions on how we should treat others when human interaction creates inevitable conflict.

Interestingly, the first rulings that Moses focuses on relate to the treatment of slaves. Here the Israelites, having just been freed from the bondage of slavery to their Egyptian taskmasters, are given specific instructions about how to lovingly handle the relationship between a slaveholder and slave. Hopefully, with memories ripe with remembrance of this condition, they will be able to relate to people confined to this humble station in life. The Holy One is definitely communicating His attributes of compassion and loving kindness to all members of humanity, no matter what their relationship is one to another.

A New Creature

The instructions in our *parashah* relate to a variety of interactions that typically occur in any society, especially given the fallen state of mankind. We are reminded that in spite of us being created in the image of God (Genesis 1:26-27; James 3:9), we have inherited a sin nature from Adam. Because we are fallen creatures, we require redemption. The nature that we have all inherited in Adam is a fallen nature that needs to be replaced by the redeemed nature only available through the death of the old nature. Once you understand who you are in Adam, confess your sin nature, repent of your sin and sin nature, and die to yourself—because then and only then are you able to receive the new nature provided as the Ruach HaKodesh or Holy Spirit is breathed into your awaiting vessel. **You are finally able to be born again!** You become a new creature in the Messiah, just as the Apostle Paul describes to the Corinthians:

"Therefore if anyone is in Messiah, **he is a new creature**; the old things passed away; behold, **new things have come**. Now all *these* things are from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Messiah and gave us the ministry of reconciliation, namely, that God was in Messiah

reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and He has committed to us the word of reconciliation. Therefore, **we are ambassadors for Messiah**, as though God were making an appeal through us; we beg you on behalf of Messiah, be reconciled to God. He made Him who knew no sin *to be* sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him" (2 Corinthians 5:17-21).

To many of you this may sound very basic, but if you will recall, even the exemplary Torah teacher and Pharisee Nicodemus did not understand these foundational concepts. For whatever reason, Nicodemus could not comprehend the concept of being "born again," even though he was considered a leader among his brethren:

"Nicodemus said to Him, 'How can these things be?' Yeshua answered and said to him, 'Are you the teacher of Israel and do not understand these things?'" (John 3:9-10).

Of course, most of us are very familiar with this passage from the Gospels, and yet have we ever considered the thought **that even the foundational teachings of the Torah are frequently not understood by its teachers?** That reality can be applied today in many respects. This is why it is critical for us to consistently return to the Torah in order to learn more and more about our human condition and how we should conduct our lives.

We are thankful for the opportunity to become the sons and daughters of the Living God, via our adoption in Yeshua. But for whatever reasons, we need to be reminded of our responsibilities toward our fellow man, even after we have inherited new life in the Messiah. Paul comments about the awesomeness of our adoption into God's family in his letter to the Romans:

"For you have not received a spirit of slavery leading to fear again, but you have received a spirit of adoption as sons by which we cry out, 'Abba! Father!' The Spirit Himself testifies with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, heirs also, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Messiah, if indeed we suffer with *Him* so that we may also be glorified with *Him*. For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us. For the anxious longing of the creation waits eagerly for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself also will be set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation groans and suffers the pains of childbirth together until now. **And not only this, but also we ourselves, having the first fruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our body"** (Romans 8:15-23).

Just as Paul writes, we as Believers in Yeshua do not walk in a spirit of slavery, but instead in a spirit of adoption as sons of the Most High. Hallelujah for His mercy to us! But let us now turn to the Torah portion and see what our Father wants us to consider, as once again His instructions communicate basic life principles to His sons and daughters.

Civil Laws

As you read through *Mishpatim*, you are reminded of some of the basic instructions about how we should treat one another when the inevitable problems of human interaction occur. Here, the yardstick of instruction is essentially "the Golden Rule." When we face challenges today, these instructions articulate how the Holy One would have conflicts resolved.

Interestingly, as you read these rulings you will note that fairness, equality, and compassion seem to permeate the statements. If the Spirit of God resides inside of you, then when you read these various ordinances, the Spirit should bear witness that the remedies and treatments for various violations of human conduct seem perfectly equitable. Over many centuries, these very statements have been incorporated into the civil laws of societies influenced by the Judeo-Christian values established in Holy Writ. This is not to say that all of these laws are reiterated exactly, but that the essence is certainly there in our Western judicial system. (Even pagan societies that do not acknowledge the God of Israel have benefited from the Torah's moral message.)

The difference between when these commands were originally given to Israel and today, is that we live in the post-Resurrection period that has made the understanding of these rulings clearer through the teachings of Yeshua and His Apostles. We do not stone children for striking or cursing their parents, because Yeshua has atoned for this penalty. However, when you read those statements you realize how important God considers the adherence to the commandment regarding how we should honor our parents. If the stated penalty for disobedience was capital punishment, then the Lord is very serious about His people revering their fathers and mothers.

When you couple these kinds of statements with other reiterations about keeping the Sabbath, the appointed times, the first-born offerings, not bearing false witness, properly treating the poor, widows, orphans, speaking out about leaders, lending money, etc., you begin to realize that at times throughout your life you have probably not followed these rulings perfectly. You have probably broken all the rules. As a result of breaking these rules, you are therefore guilty and need to pay restitution. Some of the restitution principles are articulated in this *parashah*, but when you are completely honest with yourself, you begin to realize that you have probably not paid the price perfectly for your various transgressions.

The Almighty God Himself is perfectly aware of each and every transgression we have committed. He knows the when, where, and to what degree each of us has sinned. He knows that each of us is indeed bankrupt in our sins and trespasses. Eventually, in spite of our vain human attempts to keep all of these commandments, especially coupled with the remaining ordinances that come throughout the Torah, one should hopefully come to the logical conclusion that he or she cannot possibly avoid the penalties that ultimately lead to death and eternal separation from God. If you really think through all of these things seriously, the final conclusion would be not too unlike what many cried out to the Apostles at various times: **“Sirs, what must I do to be saved?”** (Acts 16:33).

Yeshua's Upgrade

Yeshua came to Earth and sacrificed Himself, paying the penalty for our sins. But before He did this, He spent some time with His Disciples and others trying to help them understand some of the basic principles of His Father's Instruction. Yeshua's teachings bring a great depth and dimension to what we are constantly learning in the Torah—some of us for the first time. Many of the things Yeshua says are almost impossible for a person who has nothing more than a natural, fleshly mind. As the Apostle Paul reminds us, a natural man is incapable of receiving things from the Spirit:

“But a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised. But he who is spiritual appraises all things, yet he himself is appraised by no one. For WHO HAS KNOWN THE MIND OF THE LORD, THAT HE WILL INSTRUCT HIM? But we have the mind of Messiah” (1 Corinthians 2:14-16).

Consequently, we have a great number of people throughout the ages who have been trying to understand and comment about the teachings of Yeshua and the Apostles—and now the Torah. Unfortunately, many have not dealt with the reality about coming to the end of themselves and being “born again” in order to have the spiritual capacity to even understand the basic teachings of the Bible. This, you can imagine, has created a tremendous amount of confusion over the ages. When one reads the words of Yeshua, and His clarification about the Torah principles that come from a section like *Mishpatim*, many are befuddled. Consider the commands that deal with the loss of an eye or a tooth. Read how Yeshua applies the proper meaning in His Sermon on the Mount:

“You have heard that it was said, ‘AN EYE FOR AN EYE, AND A TOOTH FOR A TOOTH.’ But I say to you, **do not resist an evil person; but whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also**” (Matthew 5:38-39).

In *Mishpatim*, some commandments are given about how one is supposed to be compensated for the loss of an eye or a tooth, or whatever else has been lost. Some of these

circumstances will arise due to the fallen nature of man. Out of anger or passion, a person might strike someone and cause an eye or a tooth to be lost. In that case, the Torah tells us how one is to handle the restitution. But Yeshua remarks about the spiritual causes of such a loss. Here, He speaks about turning one's cheek and loving the person so much that the individual is willing to receive another blow in order to show that person what the ultimate goal of the Torah is. It is not a matter of the eye or the tooth, but how can one love his neighbor so much that he is willing to win him over to the love that is emanating from one who truly follows God. In other words, what is going to convict a person who has lost his temper and control of his emotions more? The perfect restitution for the infraction, or a response out of love that indicates that love for the person is far greater than all the harm he can do physically? As Yeshua continues in this particular passage, He expresses the meaning of true love established by the Torah:

"If anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, let him have your coat also. Whoever forces you to go one mile, go with him two. Give to him who asks of you, and do not turn away from him who wants to borrow from you. You have heard that it was said, 'YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for He causes His sun to rise on *the* evil and *the* good, and sends rain on *the* righteous and *the* unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? If you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing *than others*? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? **Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect**" (Matthew 5:40-48).

Yeshua tells those in His audience to give up shirts, walk extra miles, give freely, love their enemies, and pray for those who persecute. Why? Because then and only then will you be "sons of your Father who is in heaven." He concludes with the impossible requirement that one is to be perfect, just the Father in Heaven is perfect. Yeshua knows this is impossible for human beings to attain to in their own strength, and yet He clearly declares it as a requirement for following Him. **Following Yeshua's teachings are virtually impossible without the Holy Spirit and His atoning work covering our lives.**

The Heart Condition

As we look further into the teachings of Yeshua, we find that He is desperately attempting to explain what these Torah principles really mean. He encounters a group of Pharisees from Jerusalem who follow tradition to the extent of it negating the Torah itself. Yeshua rebukes them for forgetting the basic principles of God's Instruction:

"Then some Pharisees and scribes came to Yeshua from Jerusalem and said, 'Why do Your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat bread.' And He answered and said to them, 'Why do you yourselves transgress the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition? For God said, "**HONOR YOUR FATHER AND MOTHER,**" and, "**HE WHO SPEAKS EVIL OF FATHER OR MOTHER IS TO BE PUT TO DEATH.**" But you say, "Whoever says to *his* father or mother, 'Whatever I have that would help you has been given *to God*,' he is not to honor his father or his mother." And *by this* you invalidated the word of God for the sake of your tradition. You hypocrites, rightly did Isaiah prophesy of you: "**THIS PEOPLE HONORS ME WITH THEIR LIPS, BUT THEIR HEART IS FAR AWAY FROM ME. BUT IN VAIN DO THEY WORSHIP ME, TEACHING AS DOCTRINES THE PRECEPTS OF MEN.**" After Yeshua called the crowd to Him, He said to them, 'Hear and understand. ***It is not what enters into the mouth that defiles the man, but what proceeds out of the mouth, this defiles the man.***' Then the disciples came and said to Him, 'Do You know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this statement?' But He answered and said, 'Every plant which My heavenly Father did not plant shall be uprooted. Let them alone; they are blind guides of the blind. And if a blind man guides a blind man, both will fall into a pit.' Peter said to Him, 'Explain the parable to us.' Yeshua said, 'Are you still lacking in understanding also? **Do you not understand that everything that goes into the mouth passes into the stomach, and is eliminated? But the things that proceed out of the mouth come from the heart, and those defile the man. For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murders, adulteries,**

fornications, thefts, false witness, slanders. These are the things which defile the man; but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile the man” (Matthew 15:1-20).

These Pharisees, likely of the stricter School of Shammai, are questioning the *halachah* of Yeshua and His Disciples, and why they are not following their *halachah*. Here, Yeshua refers them to the commandment about honoring one’s father and mother, and describes how they have grossly misinterpreted it. He quotes the Prophet Isaiah who adroitly stated that the problem with these people will be confined to the heart. Isaiah says, “These people come near to me with their mouth and honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. **Their worship of me is made up only of rules taught by men**” (Isaiah 29:13, NIV). Yeshua points out that these human precepts and doctrines they have created have subtracted from true obedience to God. These actions seen here do not reflect a love for the Holy One that evidences what is referred to as the two most important commandments:

“One of them, a lawyer, asked Him *a question*, testing Him, “Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?” And He said to him, “**YOU SHALL LOVE THE LORD YOUR GOD WITH ALL YOUR HEART, AND WITH ALL YOUR SOUL, AND WITH ALL YOUR MIND.**” This is the great and foremost commandment. The second is like it, “**YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF.**” On these two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets” (Matthew 22:35-40).

Here, Yeshua answers the question about the greatest commandment by telling the lawyer that one must love God and one’s neighbor. The key is that a person must love the Lord with all of his heart. The evidence of this is that he will love his neighbor as much as he loves himself. A person will perform all of the ordinances we see in this Torah portion toward others because of a transformed heart that can only be implanted in one who knows and serves the Lord.

When you read the teachings of the Apostles, you see these concepts explained and applied more fully. The Apostle John comprehended the essence of love, as exemplified in the Epistle of 1 John. He comments that if one cannot love a brother whom he has seen, how can he love a God whom he has not seen?

“If someone says, ‘I love God,’ and hates his brother, he is a liar; for the one who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from Him, that the one who loves God should love his brother also” (1 John 4:20-21).

These are direct words that we should all digest in our spirits. The evilness of a liar ushers forth from a person who has not been truly transformed by God, and is performing His will. Yeshua attests to this reality:

“**But the things that proceed out of the mouth come from the heart, and those defile the man. For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, slanders.** These are the things which defile the man; but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile the man” (Matthew 15:18-20).

Take a good look at the evil traits that come out of the blackened heart of a natural man. These are the various categories of lies and deceptions that an unregenerate person thinks about and performs. Evil thoughts, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, lying, and blasphemy are all reflections of the lies that a person who does not truly know God will have in the deep recesses of his heart. Consequently, if your life is characterized by any, some, or even all of these treacherous actions then you are deceived—and you are a reflection of a lie that says you have a heart of flesh, when you do not. You have unfinished business with the Lord that you need to take care of. The Prophet Jeremiah says that you have a sick heart residing inside of you:

“**The heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick; who can understand it?** I, the LORD, search the heart, I test the mind, even to give to each man according to his ways, according to the results of his deeds” (Jeremiah 17:9-10).

You need to check and see what is coming forth from your mouth, which comes forth from your heart. Yeshua says that what proceeds from a person is what truly defiles him:

“That which proceeds out of the man, that is what defiles the man. For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed the evil thoughts, fornications, thefts, murders, adulteries, deeds of

coveting *and* wickedness, *as well as* deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride *and* foolishness. All these evil things proceed from within and defile the man” (Mark 7:20-23).

Earlier, in His Sermon on the Mount, Yeshua elevated the actions that warranted stoning to penalties being incurred from the thoughts of the sins themselves (Matthew 5:21-30). Throughout His teachings, the Lord is more concerned about a person’s heart and how it needs to be changed from a heart of stone to a heart of flesh. Ezekiel prophesies that in the Last Days when all Israel is restored, the Lord will make sure that all of His chosen people have a new heart:

“Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. **Moreover, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will be careful to observe My ordinances**” (Ezekiel 36:25-27).

Only *after* the new heart of flesh has replaced the heart of stone, can the son or daughter of the Living God walk in His statutes and truly observe His ordinances. **Every person needs a new heart in order to even begin to understand the rules that should bring us to the point of crying out for salvation.**

We have much to consider this week as we reflect on the ordinances and precepts that God has established for His people. May we hold fast to those rules, so just like the Israelites in the wilderness, we too can claim what the ancients claimed:

“**Then he took the book of the covenant and read it in the hearing of the people; and they said, ‘All that the LORD has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient!’ So Moses took the blood and sprinkled it on the people, and said, ‘Behold the blood of the covenant, which the LORD has made with you in accordance with all these words’**” (Exodus 24:7-8).

Today as Believers in Yeshua, we can experience the fullness of those things that the ancients only heard about. While Moses sprinkled animal blood on the people, the author of Hebrews testifies that the blood of Yeshua Himself inaugurates the New Covenant where the commandments of God are written on our hearts, and we can confidence to go to the Father in His name:

“Therefore, brethren, since we have confidence to enter the holy place by the blood of Yeshua, **by a new and living way which He inaugurated for us through the veil, that is, His flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God,** let us draw near with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled *clean* from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water” (Hebrews 10:19-22).

We should not only have the new heart of flesh, washed by the blood of the Messiah, but we should also have our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience, and our bodies washed by the water of God’s Word. May we all be blessed in this understanding as we consider His rules and live them out as a testimony of what the Lord has done for us!

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