

Echoes of Eden

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Parashat Mishpatim 5774

Minutiae

mi·nu·ti·ae

mə'n(y)ōōSHē,ē,-SHē,ī/plural noun: minutia

1. *the small, precise, or trivial details of something : "the minutiae of everyday life"*

Some words are upbeat; they energize and inspire us. Other words deflate and confound us. "Spiritual" and "ethereal" are among the former; "minutiae" is a prime example of the latter.

The theophany at Sinai, the spiritual symphony of sight and sound in which God revealed Himself to the Jewish People, embodied all of the uplifting resonance words are capable of imparting. On the other hand, Parashat Mishpatim, with its myriad details and legal minutia, seems more than an anticlimax; we can almost feel the words themselves drag us down from the spiritual heights experienced at Sinai.

Many of us do not love details, especially when we are told what we should do,

what we **must** do, and precisely how we must do it. Our generation is characterized by freelancing, going with the flow, "doing what feels right". Ours is the age in which personal autonomy is regarded as foremost among man's inalienable rights. We find being told what to do 'to the nth degree' stifling and demoralizing. How, then, do we contend with the Torah's shift between the spectacular Revelation of Parashat Yitro, when ten magnificent utterances were shared by God that would uplift us by revealing the basis for

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a lofty existence, and this week's parasha - which goes into painstaking, even painful legal detail?

If we are careful in reading Parashat Mishpatim, the transition between these two seemingly different parshiot appears less a sharp turn and more of a segue: The details contained in this week's parasha are, in fact, intrinsic to the content of the Revelation recounted in the preceding parasha. This insight forces us to reconsider the Ten Commandments in a new light: Parashat Mishpatim contains a "fleshing out" of the Ten Commandments transmitted at Sinai, which are ten broad principles or categories of law and not particular, specific points.

However, there is a much deeper significance to the juxtaposition of these two different views of Jewish Law. Our understanding should look deeper than the structure of the Torah text, beyond the question of the organization of the material and ideas. The primary issue, the most important question, is the aim of the Revelation itself, and the purpose of the minutia transmitted immediately in its aftermath. The Revelation at Sinai, the Ten Commandments, and the particulars of law transmitted in Parashat Mishpatim all speak to one central issue: creating and maintaining a relationship with God.

Man may see himself as a lowly slave, separated from his master by an impossible gulf. We are small and finite, and our Creator is infinite, unapproachable, beyond our understanding. How can the gulf be bridged? How can we come closer to God, involve Him in our lives and elevate ourselves to the point that we are worthy of His love? God gives us responsibilities, drawing us into a proactive, reciprocal relationship. He gives us tasks and taboos that empower us and enable us to give expression to our desire to bridge the chasm that separates us from Him.

For some people, the opportunity to be even a slave to the Almighty is sufficient; the relationship itself is reward enough. For others, the detailed commandments may be framed as terms of endearment: As in the case of

loving spouses, intimacy is often expressed by small gestures and behaviors. Gala celebrations and expensive gifts are nice, and are certainly an apt expression of appreciation and emotion, but the big gestures are not the woof

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and warp of the relationship. The fabric of a loving marriage is woven from details and small gestures, from everyday kindness, care and consideration. In a loving relationship, these details are neither bothersome, cumbersome nor daunting; rather, they are opportunities to build and grow a relationship, to express appreciation, respect and value. These details are not “minutiae” or annoying demands. They are opportunities - small but constant expressions of love.

When a spouse feels “used” or put upon, enslaved by the gestures or stifled by the restrictions involved in maintaining this relationship, resentful of the small acts of kindness and expressions of love, the relationship becomes dysfunctional. And herein lies the key to understanding Parashat Mishpatim, and all of Jewish Law: The ultimate goal is to build a relationship with God, with each detailed commandment or restriction representing an opportunity to express our love and appreciation for the myriad gifts and kindnesses, large and small, which God bestows upon us every day. As in interpersonal relationships, true expressions of love that build a relationship – small gifts of flowers or chocolate, a cup of coffee, a smile, any small but meaningful gesture – are to be cherished. They are not “minutiae”; they are, individually and in total, overwhelming expressions of love.

When framed in this manner, legal minutiae are magically transformed into acts and expressions of love, reciprocal gestures that help us build a relationship with God – a relationship that is spiritual and ethereal, uplifting and inspiring.

For a more in-depth analysis see: <http://arikahn.blogspot.co.il/2014/01/audio-and-essays-parashat-mishpatim.html>