

## Parshat Mishpatim

### The “Other’ Book of Sinai

Moshe Taragin

Delineating the various religious manuals delivered at Har Sinai, the Torah mentions the luchot or tablets containing the Ten Commandments, and a Sefer Torah containing the word of God and His 613 commandments. After listing these two Divine ‘compilations’ the pasuk includes a redundant phrase: “asher katavti” – which literally means these works were crafted by God. Obviously, both the luchot and the Torah were authored by God; why does the Torah stress this Divine authorship? Rabbi Meir of Dvinsk a late 19<sup>th</sup> century Rabbi otherwise known as the Meshech Chochmah (the name of his commentary on the Torah) claims that this extra clause alludes to a SEPARATE “book” which was delivered at Har Sinai. In addition to the Torah and the tablets God delivered a “book of Nature” at Sinai. What does this book contain and why was it bundled with the luchot and a sefer Torah?

Before Har Sinai and before direct revelation, humanity had discovered G-d through Nature. Most failed, but Avraham succeeded and launched the most dramatic revolution in human history. By probing our vast world he sensed a Creator; he didn’t just observe cold science but discerned moral energy in our world. The world was choreographed to support life and human welfare. Avraham sensed a world of prosperity and wanted to locate the

Creator who possessed a “moral interest” in human welfare. In addition to the morality of God’s external world, Avraham also detected a corresponding “inner morality”- that God had created Man as fundamentally kind and moral. He sensed that God had vested every human being with inner nobility and virtue. Ultimately, Avraham craved to identify the “source” of the morality he discerned both in Nature and in the human heart.

Four hundred years after this massive discovery, Har Sinai provided a far more direct source of interaction with God. Man no longer had to decipher God in the world around him or in the natural heart within him. Having received the Torah, we could now directly study God’s will. After Har Sinai and the provision of this more direct ‘delivery mechanism’ what would happen to the original access point- the book of Nature? Would our pursuit of God through the world around us and the world within us continue to be relevant? Would Har Sinai render that “book” obsolete? After all, why bother to trace God through the morality he instilled in the human heart when we can interview him by studying His directly revealed will. For this reason God bundled this book of nature alongside the Torah and luchot of Sinai to remind us that revelation doesn’t supplant the book of Nature- it merely adds an additional level.

Without question, the Torah isn’t merely an “additional” level of Divine interaction but the primary avenue of accessing God. Torah contains clear, authoritative and immutable mandates from God and fashions a more detailed map of religious experience. Halachik fidelity isn’t a product of speculating how God would instruct our behavior but is built upon clear and concise

directives. As much as Nature reveals God it cannot offer a specific behavioral map.

Torah is primary for a second reason: the book of Torah is actually a blueprint for all reality and for all of nature. By definition, all disciplines from math and science to psychology and neuroscience can be drawn from the depth of Torah wisdom. Of course most of us are incapable of studying Torah deeply enough to access these areas of knowledge; those who desire knowledge in these areas typically must study them in a more frontal manner. However, fundamentally, Torah is the code upon which that “book of Nature” was formed.

Though Torah is primary and seminal the book of Nature was still included at Har Sinai- as we are expected to continue our religious development based on the book of nature and not just the book of Torah.

A while back I visited shul which had experienced some plumbing problems due to overstuffing the toilets. Glaring signs were hung admonishing that it was halachikally forbidden to overstuff the facilities since this would incur repair costs and would be considered theft or geneivah. Similarly, people were warned about drying their hands with too many paper towels as this was also a violation of halachik theft. Is our behavior solely governed by the parameters of Halacha? Shouldn't our conduct in public washrooms be governed by moral conscience and politeness to others and not only by halachik strictures? In addition to improving our “frumkeit” do we also work at our menshlichkeit? Frumkeit is detailed in the Torah while politeness and menshlichkeit resides within most human hearts. Many decisions and actions lie beyond the realm of halachik calculus but are

impacted by basic norms of decency and civility. Have we become so sensitive to the lines of Torah text and Shulchan Oruch code that we ignore the murmurings of our noble hearts and the book of nature which was also delivered at Har Sinai?

Sensitivity to the “book of nature” must also determine the types of role models we are inspired by. Obviously, our primary role models are those who excel at the study of Torah and the application of halacha. These people have mastered the book of Torah and succeeded in orienting their lives around Torah. However, we have much to learn from decent and noble-minded people who live morally excellent lifestyles even if their experience is severed from Torah. There are people who are naturally kind, compassionate, dedicated and selfless in a more natural fashion and not because they aspire to a halachik lifestyle. For example there are many non-Jews, whose lives exist outside the orbit of Torah who can inspire us with their behavior and character! They excel at the book of Nature even if the formal book of 613 mitzvot doesn't apply to them.

More importantly, our ability to fuse the two books must shape our overall view of religion. God's law isn't meant to counter our natural state of being but to uplift it and ennoble it. The book of Torah didn't replace the book of nature but augmented it. Our success in religion is meant to augment us as humans. It is meant to make us more religious, devoted and pious but also more successful as humans. Religion which augments our humanity is the ideal blend between the two books. Religion which shrinks us as human beings ignores the full package of Sinai.