

Parashat Mishpatim, 5781, 2021:

Rabbi David Etengoff

Humility and Holiness

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechiel, Chana bat Shmuel, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Shoshana Elka bat Avraham, Tikvah bat Rivka Perel, Peretz ben Chaim, Chaya Sarah bat Reb Yechezkel Shraga, Shmuel Yosef ben Reuven, the *Kedoshim* of Har Nof, Pittsburgh, and Jersey City, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Mordechai HaLevi ben Miriam Tovah, Moshe ben Itta Golda, Yocheved Dafneh bat Dinah Zehavah, Reuven Shmuel ben Leah, Yonatan ben Yael and the health and safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

The first two chapters of our *parasha* focus upon *mishpatim* — laws that are crucial for the maintenance of a just, moral and righteous society. As such, the concluding *pasuk* of the second of these two chapters seems quite incongruous: “And you shall be holy people to Me, and flesh torn (*basar treifah*) in the field you shall not eat; you shall throw it to the dog[s].” (*Sefer Shemot* 22:30, this and all Bible translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

The Ramban (Nachmanides, 1194-1270) suggests the following rationale for our *pasuk*'s position in our *sidrah*:

The reason for [the placement of] this verse is because until this point the Torah mentions the rationally apprehensible laws (*mishpatim*) and warns us against morally reprehensible matters. And now, however, when the Torah is poised to introduce its discussion of food-based prohibitions [that are found in later *parshiot*], it begins by stating “And you shall be holy people to Me.” It is fitting that a person should be able to eat anything that would enable him to live; and the only reason for the prohibitions is to maintain purity of the soul. The one who eats only spiritually clean foods will not develop inflexibility and arrogance of the soul. Therefore, it states: “And you shall be holy people to Me.” This means that I [Hashem] desire that you should be holy people in order for you to be fitting for Me, to cleave to Me, for I am holy... (*Commentary on the Torah*, translation my own)

In the Ramban's view, the laws of *kashrut* are a spiritual shield that guard our soul's

holiness and purity. Intransigence, conceit, and haughtiness represent the polar opposite of *kedushah* (holiness). Perhaps the single greatest threat to *kedushah* is *ga'avah* (arrogance). Little wonder, then, that the Ramban, strongly warns us against this toxic *middah* (character trait) in his celebrated *Iggeret HaRamban*:

And now, my son, understand and observe that whoever feels that he is greater than others is rebelling against the Kingship of Hashem, because he is adorning himself with His garments, as it is written (*Sefer Tehillim*, 93:1), "Hashem reigns, He wears clothes of pride." Why should one feel proud? Is it because of wealth? Hashem makes one poor or rich (*Sefer Shmuel* I:2:7). Is it because of honor? It belongs to Hashem, as we read (*Sefer Divrei Hayamim* I:29:12), "Wealth and honor come from You." So how can one adorn himself with Hashem's honor? And one who is proud of his wisdom surely knows that Hashem "takes away the speech of assured men and reasoning from the sages." (*Sefer Iyov* 12:20) So, we see that everyone is the same before Hashem, since with His anger He lowers the proud and when He wishes He raises the low. So, lower yourself and Hashem will lift you up! (Translation, <http://www.pirchei.co.il/specials/ramban/ramban.htm>)

The Ramban is teaching us that human pride is antithetical to *kedushah* and constitutes rebellion against the Kingship of the Almighty. Wealth, honor, and glory are merely passing shadows that can be taken away from humankind, just as they are bestowed upon us, by the Creator. How, then, can we avoid the pitfalls of *ga'avah*, so that we may achieve *kedushah* and draw closer to Hashem? The Ramban provides us with very practical advice:

In all your actions, words and thoughts, always regard yourself as standing before Hashem, with His *Shechinah* [Divine presence] above you, for His glory fills the whole world. Speak with fear and awe... Act with restraint in front of everyone. When someone calls you, do not answer loudly, but gently and softly, as one who stands before his master.

In sum, when we recognize we are always standing before the Almighty, we will act with humility before Him, and restraint and dignity toward others.

The words of Michah, the eighth century BCE prophet, provide strong underpinning for

the Ramban's ideas: "*Higid lecha adam mah tov, umah Hashem dorash memcha ki im asot mishpat v'ahavat chesed v'hatznayah lechet im Elokecha*" ("He has told you O' man what is good! What does G-d require from you except to perform acts of justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your G-d?" *Sefer Michah* 6:8) Michah teaches us that good and, by extension a good life, are defined first and foremost by actions that embody justice in our dealings with others. This is an essential aspect of Jewish living. We are all created *b'tzelem Elokim* (in G-d's image). As such, we are all the same in His eyes. By maintaining a constant awareness of the intrinsic value of our fellow human beings, we emulate Hashem (*imitatio Dei*).

The next *middah* that is stressed by Michah is kindness. While this quality appears to be an "extra" in many quarters of modern life, Michah categorically states that it is part and parcel of what Jewish living should represent. As such, he urges us to love acts of kindness, and ardently practice these behaviors with all humankind. The *navi* concludes his famous words with the expression, "and to walk humbly with your G-d." *Anavah* (humility) is one of the most important aspects of Jewish life. As the Ramban states in the *Iggeret*, when we act humbly, Hashem's Divine spirit and glory rest upon us, and we merit *Olam Haba* (the World to Come). May we ever seek to draw near to Hashem in *kedushah*, and may His countenance shine upon us all. *V'chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom, and may Hashem in His infinite mercy remove the pandemic from *klal Yisrael* and from all the nations of the world.

Past *drashot* may be found at my blog-website: <http://reparashathashavuah.org>

They may also be found on <http://www.yutorah.org> using the search criteria Etengoff and the *parasha's* name.

The email list, *b'chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added, please do not hesitate to contact me via email <mailto:rdbe718@gmail.com>.

*** My audio *shiurim* on the topics of *Tefilah* and *Tanach* may be found at:
<http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpd>

*** I have posted 164 of [Rabbi Soloveitchik's](#) English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. Please click on the highlighted link.