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Mishpatim 5783

The Meaning of Wealth

Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm z"l (Originally delivered February 14, 1953)

Today is particularly appropriate for a discussion of the Jewish Meaning of Wealth. First of all, we have just read the special Biblical chapter of Parshas Shekolim, the chapter concerning the donation to the Temple, by all Israelite adults, of the famous half-shekel; the charity tax, as it were. The shekel, the standard form of currency in ancient Israel, is the Jewish symbol of wealth, much as the dollar is its American counterpart. Second, ours is an age when the acquisition of riches is a sure sign of success and an admission ticket into high society. Third, ours too is a time when wealth in this country is factually within the reach of most men. It is proper, therefore, for us to do some constructive thinking along Jewish lines and attempt to discover the Jewish Meaning of Wealth.

The first clue to understanding what wealth, in the Jewish sense, is all about, comes from one of those lofty and beautiful legends which our people wove about the tradition of *shekolim*. The Talmud relates that in instructing Moses concerning the laws of *shekolim*, G-d actually demonstrated the lesson, and He showed him *Shekel Shel Esh*, a shekel of fire, which He had brought up *mi'tachas kisei ha'kavod*, from under G-d's Throne of Glory. A SHEKEL of fire from under G-d's Throne. What an image – and what a message. There is absolutely nothing immoral about wealth, our Rabbis mean to tell us. Judaism, unlike its “daughter religion,” does not make a virtue of poverty, and does not shut the door of Heaven in the face of the rich. The rich and the poor alike can both gain entrance into the Kingdom of Heaven; there is no economic discrimination. A man need not be ashamed of his *shekel*. He can hold it aloft, if honestly earned, as shining as a torch of pure fire. But – and this is the essence of what they want to tell us – never forget the source of your shekels. Never forget the origin of your good fortune. Remember at all

times that if you were blessed with many shekels, with a decent living and a measure of wealth, that the source of your blessing is G-d; that the shekels were assigned to you from the Throne of Glory; and that, therefore, those shekels must be used in a way which will bear examination by all people, they will be able to stand up under public security, just as if they were made out of fire itself, for all to see. Indeed, when a man knows that his shekels were granted to him by G-d, and that they must not embarrass the Throne of Glory from whence they came, then they are as open and as pure as shekels of fire.

Our great and wealthy nation had better learn this fact, and impress it in no uncertain terms upon the memories of its sons and daughters. Too many great empires have grown rich and become so top-heavy that they have toppled over into oblivion – all because they forgot that their wealth was only a trust assigned to them by G-d from his *kisei ha'kavod*. Ancient Greece never thought of its wealth as a loan from G-d's Throne of Glory. It rather imagined that all its riches were rightly assigned to Greece in order to be able to lord it over the despicable “Barbarians.” The unholy Roman Empire certainly could not conceive of fiery shekels emanating from G-d's Throne. And because this thought did not dawn upon them, they built an empire by deceit and squandered it by immorality. One can go all through history in this same way, showing how empire after empire fell and declined because they would not admit that their wealth was a sacred trust. Our beloved America is the richest nation upon earth today. Our shekel is worth more than any other. Fortunately, in recent years we have showed signs of learning from history, and we have begun to act as if we knew that our shekels must be used in a manner pleasing to the good G-d who blessed us with them. By means of Point Four and other agencies we

have tried to help less fortunate peoples. We have tried to make of our dollars *shekolim shel esh*, fiery shekels. But let us be on guard against those who would subvert this noble attitude; against those who would cynically attach selfish strings to this benevolent aid we offer our needy fellows. Let us remember that true *shekolim shel esh*, true fiery shekels, must of necessity burn away any strings which might be attached. Let us remember that the value of our wealth is based not upon the gold which we have, but upon the fiery shekels in which we believe; that our credit is drawn not in Fort Knox but in the Divine Throne of Glory.

With an attitude of that sort no nation, and no man, need be ashamed of his wealth. The realization that wealth is G-d's gift, and therefore carries with it responsibility as well as privilege, is the first premise in the Jewish Meaning of Wealth.

And from this there follows, of course, a second fact: that wealth must not be stored away for its own sake. Riches were given in order to be used. Money which is hoarded is of little value indeed.

The great Rabbi Meir had that in mind when he asked *aizehu ashir*, "Who is a rich man?" and himself answered, *kol she'yesh lo nachas ruach me'oshro*, "The rich man is he who enjoys his wealth." This is an eminently practical definition of Wealth. Practical from the point of view of economist and psychologist as well as teacher of religion. Certainly, a rich man who does not enjoy his riches is not really wealthy, for he has no money – rather, his money has him. Real, practical wealth is not the amount you have, but the amount you use. Wealth which is not useable, and is not used and exploited, is not wealth. If one cannot enjoy his affluence, then he is a hoarder, not a rich man. A man who has only a heavy bank-book but no check-book is a pauper.

And what holds true for the wealth of money holds true for the wealth of other things. A man with a propensity for hoarding money will be similarly inclined, for instance, to hoard useless knowledge. It is the same type of pitiful mentality which motivates both. Our Sages tell of an interesting conversation between Moses and his fabulously wealthy antagonist, Korah. They tell us that Korah asked Moses: *bayis malei s'farim, mahu she'yehei patur mi'mezuzah?* If one's house is packed with Scrolls of the Law, with Bibles and Talmuds and other holy works, is that house too to be adorned with a Mezuzah? (explain). "Yes," answered Moses, "a Mezuzah must be affixed to the door-post of such a house too." Korah replied, sneeringly,

that it was ridiculous to say that a houseful of holy writings is insufficient, while only two small chapters are enough, provided they are affixed to the door-post. You see, my friends, this was more than a biting conversational duel. It was more than a debate which involved what might seem an obscure point of law. Larger issues loomed before them. The issue was the use of learning, in the same way we discussed the use of money. Korah propounded the theory of hoarding – it is sufficient that one store himself up with knowledge, like a room full of books. That, he believed, was all that G-d required of man. But no, answered Moses, storing knowledge is like storing money. If it is going to be piled up without being used, then one has not fulfilled his religious obligations. It is far from sufficient to have a warehouse full of Biblical chapters and works. One must post a Mezuzah on his door, he must have learning at his side, it must guide and guard over his comings-in and goings-out, his imports and his exports. If his learning is not used to guide him over the thresh-holds of life, then it is merely a heterogeneous conglomeration of useless facts. And there is nothing holy about that. So it is with wealth, so it is with learning, so it is with everything else.

In 1876, that famous Englishman, Thomas Huxley, visited America at the invitation of the then-new John Hopkins University of Baltimore. The main theme of his speech was this passage: "I cannot say that I am in the slightest degree impressed by your bigness or your material resources, as such. Size is not grandeur; territory does not make a nation. The great issue, about which hangs a true sublimity and the terror of overhanging fate, is, what are you going to do with all these things?" A good question indeed, and one which clearly expresses what we have been saying. But Thomas Huxley was not the first to say so. Rabbi Meir preceded him when he said that *aizehu ashir, kol she'yesh lo nachas ruach me'oshro*, that the rich man is one who enjoys or uses his wealth. And not even Rabbi Meir was the first to enunciate this idea. Many many years before, that wisest of all men, King Solomon, said: *yesh ra'ah cholah she'ra'isi tachas ha'shemesh, osher shamur li've'alav le'ra'aso*, "There is one sickening evil I have seen under the sun, namely, riches which are stored up for their owner, for his own hurt." Let a man store up his riches, and they are "for his hurt," for they are useless. Such a man is not only evil, he is sick – psychically.

The third point in the Jewish Meaning of Wealth is based upon the famous words of Ben Zoma, quoted in Pirkei

Avos, or Ethics of the Fathers. Ben Zoma gives the crowning definition of wealth, a definition which strikes closer to the truth, it seems, than those given by his colleagues. *Aizehu ashir*, “Who is a rich man?” asks Ben Zoma, as did Rabbi Meir; and he answers, “*ha’sameach be’chelko*,” “The rich man is he who is happy with his lot.” Riches should be measured not by the coldly objective standard of quantity, but by the subjective criterion how happy am I with what I do have. A man may be fabulously wealthy, but if he feels and thinks that what he has is insufficient, that he must have more, then he is for all practical purposes poor; for the meaning of poverty is insufficiency, and this man feels insufficient. For, for some, riches are like salt-water. You drink it to quench your thirst, only to find that it increases your desire for more water. The really rich man is one who is happy with what he has, whether that is by other standards much or little. If a man is happy, he is rich; if unhappy, he is poor. A definition, incidentally, which includes all others. And a G-dly, deeply religious and spiritual, as well as practical, definition of riches.

For who is so rich as the parent whose child quotes to him from Scriptures; who is so rich as the father whose son can teach him a “blatt gamarah”; how rich the child whose parents encourage him upon such a path;

Who is so rich as the child of meager means who, desirous of a life of daring adventure, can see an ocean in a bathtub, a mighty mountain in an inch-high ant-hill, a desert in a sandbox, a terrible, terrifying tiger in a calm, domesticated kitten;

Who is so rich as the man, who, thirsting for the beauties of nature, and without travelling to strange Lands and distant islands, can sit on a board-walk beholding the nocturnal leap of the ocean foam, and feel his heart swell

as he watches the waves wash the white sands of the beach under the mellow majesty of the moon;

Who is so rich as a people who, exiled from its homeland, deprived of its sacrificial rites and torn from its Temple, can find a Jerusalem in a Vilno, a Temple in a Yeshiva, a sacrifice in a prayer;

Yes, Ben Zoma was right; the rich man is he who is happy with his lot. Such riches are within the reach of every man. One must merely aspire to them and he has them.

To summarise then, there are three parts to the Jewish Meaning of Wealth. First, man must realize that all that he has, all his wealth and riches are his only by the grace of G-d; they are, so to speak, borrowed from the Throne of Glory. Second, his wealth is of no real value unless it is useful. His riches must work for him in order to be of any service. And, finally, and above all, the rich man is he who is happy with his lot – no matter what that lot is.

Our Sages write: *ha’roeh ben zoma ba’chalom yetsapeh le’chachmah*, “He who sees Ben Zoma in a dream may look forward to the gift of Wisdom.” Ah, Ben Zoma, Ben Zoma, many are those who dream of material wealth and riches; yet when they wake up they realize that their lives have been based upon, not a dream, but a nightmare. In their frantic drive for more and more, they reap less and less, and they finally curse their own foolishness. But, Ben Zoma, those who dream of you, and your type of wealth, of being happy each with his own lot, such men are rich indeed; and when the dream which is life draws to a close, such a man does not curse his foolishness. Rather, he thanks G-d for the gift of Wisdom. For wise are your dicta, Ben Zoma, and wise are those who follow you, and wiser still – those who dream of you.

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Cursing the Leader/Blessing the Leader

Dr. Erica Brown

In “How Leaders Should Handle Public Criticism” (*HBR*, December 12, 2022), Ron Carucci argues that the more public your role is and the more decisions you make, the more likely you are to get things wrong, and the more people will critique you in ways that are not always just or fair. “The cruel reality of leadership is that when things go wrong, you take a disproportionate amount of the blame.” This can be a hard burden to carry because the rumor mill works overtime. “When you make mistakes,

the scrutiny from the broader organization is intensified. Remember, the farther people are from the problem, the less context and understanding they have. They will fill in the blanks with conjecture, projection of their own trauma, and perceived motives for why you did what you did.”

Carucci advises leaders to accept this reality and, as hard as it may be, try not to get sidetracked by the noise. Play the long-game of impact. At the same time, respond with humility and transparency and, when necessary, set the

record straight with facts rather than emotions. Respond to the kernels of truth in what you hear, take action, and report back your results. Don't let snarky or malicious feedback make you thick-skinned or cold-hearted, Carucci warns. Be your best self even and especially when you feel crushed: "You have to be true to the values you want people to remember you by. If you don't want this moment to define you, then make sure it reveals who you intend to be." Moments of intense criticism can also be opportunities to share your deepest convictions.

I thought of Carucci's recommendations when reading a verse in Mishpatim, this week's Torah portion: "You shall not revile God, nor put a curse upon a leader (nasi) among your people" (Ex. 22:27). Cursing the leader is mentioned in the same breath as cursing God because these are two sources of authority: Divine and human. The natural tendency to question or rebel against those who have control over us or constrain us is constant. The Torah reminds us to keep it in check.

On a surface level, this may be prudent advice. Cursing those in positions of influence can have unpleasant personal consequences, to say the least. Cursing someone in the ancient world (and in some parts of the modern world today) was taken very seriously, which explains the many prohibitions throughout Tanakh that warn against it. Ecclesiastes recommends that we silence negative thoughts against the king because the walls have ears; any public criticism may come back to bite the one who questions authority: "Do not revile a king even among your intimates. Don't revile a rich man even in your bedchamber; for a bird of the air may carry the utterance, and a winged creature may report the word" (Eccl.10:20). You don't know who you can trust or where anyone's ultimate loyalties are.

Who are the leaders the Torah tells us not to curse? R. Abraham ibn Ezra mentions judges, priests, and Levites – all positions, he contends, that represent Torah. When you curse those who uphold the Torah, he is suggesting, you are, on some level, criticizing the Torah and God who gave us the Torah. Ibn Ezra adds that this law applies to speaking in secret or in public. In other words, the one who curses should try to shift his or her very mindset about the current leadership.

Ibn Ezra also helps us understand the context of this law. It appears immediately after the prohibition that one who lends money must return the garment that a poor person

gave as collateral at night and adds a line of compassion amidst a listing of laws: "In what else shall [your neighbor] sleep? Therefore, if that person cries out to Me, I will pay heed, for I am compassionate" (Ex. 22:26). Ibn Ezra examines this juxtaposition and concludes: "The poor man, while in pain during the night, might revile the judge who ruled that the lender should take the pledge."

Sforno takes this prohibition in a different direction: "Even though you may feel that the judge has judged you unfairly, you must not curse him. The reason is that no individual can judge his own guilt or innocence objectively." Before we curse a leader, we have to look in the mirror to check if we judge others more harshly than we judge ourselves. We should interrogate our own subjectivity.

The medieval compilation of mitzvot, the Sefer HaChinukh (#71:1) adds that this law applies not only to a king but also to the head of the Sanhedrin, the ancient assembly of sages who determined Jewish law, "since the intention of the verse is about anyone who is the head authority over Israel, whether it is the government of the kingdom or whether it is the government of the Torah." He extended the application of this law beyond those in political positions of power to include the authority of scholars.

So seriously was this law observed that the Talmud includes the strange and gruesome story of the sage Bava ben Buta to illustrate. King Herod called upon Bava ben Buta and placed a porcupine hide on his head to prick his eyes out. Herod sat before this blind scholar and cursed himself to see Bava ben Buta's reaction. He goaded the sage to join him. Bava ben Buta quoted our verse in Ecclesiastes – "Do not curse the king, not even in your thoughts" – but Herod pushed him further: "He is not a king since he rules illegally." Still Bava ben Buta would not concede. "And even if he were merely a rich man, I would not curse him, as it is written: 'And do not curse a rich person in your bedchamber' (Eccl.10:20). And even were he only a leader, I would not curse him, as it is written: 'And you shall not curse a leader among your people' (Ex. 22:27)" (BT Bava Batra 4a).

Bava ben Buta suffered greatly under Herod's rule, yet he still observed this commandment. Here it is important to make a distinction between criticizing and cursing. One is not forbidden to question a leader's rulings, policies or character to maintain the integrity of the office. Most ancient Israelite kings had a prophet

to guide and chastise them precisely to keep the king's power in check and remind him to answer to the King of Kings. Saul had Samuel. David had Nathan. But there is a difference between the legitimate critique of power and a course, emotional and blasphemous challenge that invokes supernatural powers against the leader.

The word for leader in our verse is "nasi," and it is in defining this term that we may better understand the prohibition. The infinitive "l'nasot" is used throughout Tanakh to refer to shouldering a burden, sometimes a very heavy one. Those who curse a leader add weight to an already heavy burden. Sometimes, in our anger or indignation, we fail to see all that a leader may be carrying. When adding to the load, we may inadvertently become the reason a leader walks away from the position. "What do I need this for?" Look around to see how many volunteers are *not* signing up for senior leadership roles because they don't want the constant criticism without much recognition or praise. It is a lot to carry.

But Nahmanides, in his interpretation of our verse, adds that the root of "nasi" also means to lift up. The role of the leader is to lift up the follower. Perhaps the word also reminds us that leaders themselves need to be uplifted. If

we lift up leaders, and they lift us up, maybe more people would sign up for these unpopular jobs. When leaders make mistakes, it is incumbent upon us to bring them to public attention, but there is a difference between constructive solutions and reckless gossip, between offering respectful feedback and cursing the leader.

In his book, *Judaism's Life-Changing Ideas*, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks shares a personal story that may provide a small window into this complex issue. At the beginning of his rabbinical career, he sought the approval of a senior rabbi and waited for a word of encouragement. He was working hard and taking risks. "You need support at such moments, because taking risks and suffering the inevitable criticism is emotionally draining. The encouragement never came. The silence hurt. It ate, like acid, into my heart." It was then that he had a shift in strategy. Instead of waiting for praise, he praised the rabbi he sought praise from. "I began to formulate it as an ethic. Don't wait to be praised: Praise others. Don't wait to be respected: Respect others. Don't stand on the sidelines, criticising others. Do something yourself to make things better."

So, consider ways you may have "cursed" a leader. What praise could you offer to lift up a leader who is lifting you?

What's the Rush?

Rabbi Joshua (The Hoffer) Hoffman z"l

This week's parsha is divided into two parts. The first part consists of a long series of laws that were given to the Jewish people after the revelation at Mt. Sinai. The second part of the parsha is a description of events that occurred at Mt. Sinai. The great Torah commentators have noted the fact that the Torah's description of the events at Mt. Sinai is split between parshas Yisro and parshas Mishpotim, and debated whether the events described in Mishpotim are presented in sequence or not. Rashi maintains that the events described at the end of parshas Mishpotim, including Moshe's telling the people "all the words of the Torah and all its ordinances (mishpotim)"; the bringing of sacrifices and the sprinkling of their blood upon the people, occurred at Mt. Sinai before God's revelation there. The teachings that Moshe read to the people from the 'book of the covenant,' according to Rashi, consisted of the seven Noachide laws and the mitzvos they had been given at Marah. According to Ramban, however, the

events occurred in sequence, as recorded, and the teaching that Moshe related to the people consisted of the first three chapters (Shemos 21-23) of parshas Mishpotim. In *Netivot to Mishpotim, 5760* (available at Torahheights.com) we discussed the approach of the Ramban to the Torah's presentation of these events. Although we mentioned, there, that Rashi, in saying that the events are presented out of sequence, is following his general approach that the Torah does not necessarily follow a chronological order in its presentation of events, we still need to understand why the sequence is, in fact, changed, and why the first series of events is recorded only after the laws of the first half of the parsha are mentioned.

The first part of parshas Mishpotim begins with the statement, "And these are the laws that you shall place before them" (Shemos 21:1). Rashi notes that the word 'eileh' - these - indicates a disconnection from what preceded, while the word 've-eileh' - and these - indicates a connection to what preceded. The connection, Rashi says, is that just as

those laws which preceded parshas Mishpotim, meaning the laws of the Decalogue, were given at Mt. Sinai, so, too, were the laws presented in parshas Mishpotim given at Mt. Sinai. One way of understanding this statement of Rashi is that although the laws in parshas Mishpotim consist, in large part, of civil laws that one could conceivably have arrived at through human intellect, they were given by God at Mt. Sinai just as the prohibitions against idolatry, swearing falsely, and the like were given there.

Rabbi Pinchos HaLevi Horowitz, in his *Ponim Yofos*, and Rabbi Gedaliah Schorr, in his *Ohr Gedalyohu*, each in his own way, both offer an added dimension to the connection mentioned by Rashi. They note that this first verse includes, as Rashi brings from the Talmud, an obligation to adjudicate disputes in a Jewish court of law, and not to go to a non-Jewish court, even if the non-Jewish court judges similarly to the Jewish one. Rashi also mentions that God told Moshe to present the laws to the nation in a clear way, as a ‘shulchan aruch,’ or a prepared table, so that they have a thorough understanding of them. Rabbi Horowitz and Rabbi Schorr go on to discuss the value of studying the civil laws of the Torah, and mention that the Talmud advises one who is looking for wisdom to study these laws. On a broader level, the study of these laws enables one to attach himself to God’s infinite wisdom, and thereby connect with him in a very deep way. Ramban, in his commentary to Mishpotim, noted that the laws of the Hebrew slave, which follow immediately after the first verse of the parsha, connect to the first verse of the Decalogue, “I am the Lord your God who took you out from the land of Egypt, from the house of slaves” (Shemos 20:2), since the slave is eventually released from his servitude. I believe that, following the way Rabbis Horowitz and Schorr view the study of the Torah’s civil laws, the very first verse in the parsha connects to the beginning of the Decalogue, as well.

Iffiness of Money

Rabbi Assaf Bednarsh (Transcribed and adapted by a talmid from the YUTorah shiur originally given at Gruss Kollel in Yerushalayim on Feb 12, 2015)

The pasuk says in this week’s Parsha: *Im kesef talveh es ami es he’ani imach*, etc. And Rashi points out that this is one of the few places that it says if you lend money to a poor person, then *lo sih’yeh lo ke-nosheh, lo sesimun alav neshech*—you shouldn’t charge him interest or pressure him, and you should be kind in the way you do

The study of the civil laws of the Torah, as mandated in the first verse of the parsha, can serve as a means of connecting ourselves to God in a very deep way. The Torah then precedes to present us with many of these laws, continuing through most of the first part of the parsha. Based on this understanding of the beginning of the parsha, we can now explain Rashi’s approach to the second part, as well.

The Torah tells us that when Moshe read the ‘book of the covenant’ to the people, they said, ‘Everything that God has said, we will do and we will listen’ (Shemos 24:6). The Talmud tells us that a certain Sadducee referred to the Jewish people as a hasty people, because they committed to acting before hearing what they would have to do. However, the rabbis themselves said that when the Jewish nation did this, they were given two crowns, one for saying they will perform the mitzvos, and one for saying they will listen. Rabbi Yosef Dov HaLevi Soloveitchk of Brisk, author of the *Beis HaLevi*, cites the Zohar, which says that the commitment to do referred to the performance of the mitzvos, and the commitment to listen referred to the study of Torah. He explains that study of Torah was implied in the first commitment, as well, because one cannot perform the mitzvos without knowing the details of their laws. However, there is an additional aspect of Torah study, unrelated to the practical need to know the halacha. This is the aspect of Torah we referred to earlier, studying Torah for its own sake, to know the wisdom of God, and connect to him through studying that wisdom. As Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin, Rabbi Soloveitchik’s ancestor, writes in his *Nefesh HaChaim*, Torah study is the best way for us, in this world, to connect to God. Rashi, by pointing out the connection between Torah study and the beginning of the Decalogue, has given us a window into understanding the dual commitment that the Jewish nation undertook at Mt. Sinai, for which it received its two crowns.

this mitzvah. This begs the question: Why does the Torah specifically use the word *im*? It’s a *chiuv de-oraysa*, found in Parshas Re’ei—*ve-ha’aveit ta’avitenu dei machsoro asher yechar lo*. You must do it!

Many answers are given to this question—both technical and philosophical. One is given by the Maharal

who says that indeed you are *chayav* to give. And sometimes we do things just because we are *chayav* to. We refrain from eating a delicious-looking cheeseburger because the Torah prohibits it—not because it’s not delicious. However, when it comes to lending money to the poor, you shouldn’t do it just because it’s a Mitzva, but rather because you want to. You should do it because you care about other people, you feel the pain of the poor person, and you want to help him. Therefore, the Torah says if you do it, not because you must, but because you choose to be a caring and compassionate person who is kind to a fellow Jew.

Ohr ha-Chaim presents a different philosophical answer based on Ibn Ezra, who says that *im* means if you have money – if you have fed your family, taken care of all your expenses, and still have extra money to lend. Some people don’t have the money and are not able to lend to a poor person. Ohr ha-Chaim expands on this theme and asks why Hashem would give a person more than what they need. Don’t we say *pose’ach es Yadecha u-masbia le-chol chai ratzon*—Hashem gives us what we need—implying an exact amount? He explains that Hashem wants this person to be His *shaliach* to share that money with other people and be His partner in helping the less fortunate. If you have money, *im kesef*, then *talveh es ami es he’ani*

The Seventh Point, Holy and Free

Rabbi Hershel Reichman

These are the laws that you should place in front of the Jewish people. If you buy a Jewish servant, he should work for six years. In the seventh year, he will go free without any payment” (Shemos 21:1–2). This parsha of Mishpatim has many dozens of laws. Why is the first law discussed in this parsha the obscure law of the Jewish slave? After all, this law occurs infrequently. We don’t have slaves at all nowadays. These halachos are observed only when we have the cycle of *shmitta* and *yovel*, only in the time of the *Beis Hamikdash*, which we don’t have now.

Furthermore, the word *eved* is a misleading word. It can mean slave or servant. Sometimes, captives are also called slaves. In view of the respect that the halacha affords an *eved ivri*, a Jewish worker is not a slave, but rather a servant. So why is the Jewish servant referred to as *eved ivri*, a term that could be misconstrued as meaning slave? Moreover,

imach—lend it to other people. He even goes so far as to interpret *im kesef* as the poor person’s money that is with you—deposited with you for safekeeping—that you must return to them. And this whole concept of *im kesef* is a fundamental lesson in Mussar. People tend to take what they have for granted—this is the root of most evils in the world. However, many Mitzvos teach us to have the opposite attitude. *Birkas ha-Mazon*—*ve-achalta, ve-savata, u-verachta es Hashem Elokecha*—for example, trains us to thank Hashem for the food we have. Someone with more money than they need may think they deserve it, or it’s naturally coming to them, making it hard for them to share with others. If you recognize that you don’t deserve it and it’s only a conditional if—that it’s not *vadai* that you are getting the money because you are smart, work hard, or it’s *stam* coming to you— then you should ask yourself why Hashem gave you this money. Many people like you are not as fortunate. And the answer is that if by the special grace of Hashem, you do have surplus money, it’s because He wants you to be His *shaliach* by sharing it with the *aniyim* of His *am*. Understanding this iffiness of money makes it a lot easier for you to give *tzedaka*. And when you use the money Hashem has deposited with you properly, he will continue to deposit money with you, and as a tip, you will keep a little for yourself as well :) Shabbat Shalom.

why does the Torah set the period of servitude as six years and schedule freedom for the seventh year? There seems to be a parallel to Shabbos. What is the connection?

Six-Directional Universe

The Shem Mishmuel cites the explanation of his father, the Avnei Neizer, about the meaning of the six years of servitude followed by freedom in the seventh year. The explanation begins with the Chassidic concept of space. According to Chassidus, space can be segmented into six directions: right, left, front, back, up, and down. Within this cube, there is an additional inner point. You can think of space as a huge six-directional cube, and we live in the center. In the middle of that area is a floating central point, suspended in the center of the cube.

According to Chassidus, the numbers six and seven respectively represent the external and the internal.

Every person has an external existence and an internal

existence. Much of what we do and experience is an external phenomenon. The experiences don't touch our inner core. There are some experiences however, that do. This is the idea of the six external sides and the one inner point as it relates to the human personality and experience.

The Avnei Neizer says that this Jewish servant/slave is a person who has had a dramatic downfall. According to Chazal, there are two ways in which a Jew can end up as a slave to a fellow Jew. He could be a thief who can't pay the debt he incurred through stealing. Since he can't pay it off, he is sold, and with the money from the sale, he pays back the victims of his crime. The second way is that a person in destitute poverty can sell himself to get out of his desperate situation.

This social and economic breakdown of a Jew can affect him only on the six outer sides of his being. These external sides can devolve into a state of disarray and ruin. His inner core, however, cannot be contaminated. The inner point of even the criminal personality or the social outcast remains pure.

This is why the Torah says the Jewish slave works for only six years. These years represent the six outer sides of a person's cubic physical reality. This outer personality of the slave is in a state of downfall. But in the seventh year, which represents the inner point, there is no breakdown. Thus, in the seventh year, the year that touches on his internal, free essence, the slave goes free. This is the independence and inner strength that remains intact despite the external breakdown. This is why the seventh year is the year of freedom.

Hashem's Introduction at Sinai

The Shem Mishmuel describes the power of this inner point. It is holy, strong, independent, and indestructible no matter what is going on outside the person. Where does this indestructible point come from?

The Aseres Hadibros engender an important question. The first commandment is, "*Anochi Hashem Elokecha asher hotzeisicha mei'erez Mitzrayim mi'beis avadim*. I am Hashem, your God, who has taken you out of the land of Egypt from the house of slaves." This is Hashem's introduction to the Jewish People and the world. Wouldn't it make more sense for God to introduce Himself as the Creator and say, "I am God who created the world?" Why did He focus on this one event of the Exodus? As incredible as it was, it is still not comparable to the creation of the universe ex nihilo. Clearly, creation is more

impressive than even the special event of the exodus from Egypt. Why does Hashem introduce and associate Himself with the focus on yetzias Mitzrayim?

The Kuzari addresses this question. Hashem wanted to introduce Himself to the Jewish People as the specific God of Israel. *Elokecha*—I am your God. Of course, Hashem is king over the whole universe. But He chose to forge a special relationship with the Jewish People. How did this relationship come into existence? When Hashem took us out of Egypt, He created a unique bond with us. He is our God. He gave us 613 mitzvos, while the rest of the world has only seven. The demands placed on the Jews are far more extensive than the demands placed on the rest of humanity. By what right does He do this? By taking us out of Egypt, He acquired the right to command us. We have special gratitude to Hashem as well, which motivates us to observe His commandments. Therefore, when God formally introduced Himself to the Jewish nation at Har Sinai, He wanted us to know that he is our God.

Holiness Absolves All Liens

The Shem Mishmuel takes a different approach to this question. There is another question that yetzias Mitzrayim prompts us to consider: How could the Jews leave Egypt? On what basis did Hashem take them out? The angels, for example, argued that the Jews were idolaters and did not deserve redemption. Why did they deserve this special exodus?

Hashem said, "Now that I took you out, we have a special relationship of a nation with its God." We know in halacha that *hekdeish mafkia midei shibud*. When Shimon owes money to Reuven, if Shimon defaults on his payments, Reuven can collect Shimon's property (for example, a house). Reuven can go to court and get a collection notice, and the judge can go take the house from Shimon. However, if Shimon sanctifies his house, making it *hekdeish*, then all liens on that house collapse. Had Shimon instead sold his house to someone else, the court still could collect from the buyer. But the holiness of *hekdeish* cancels the lien on the property.

This halacha, says the Shem Mishmuel, applied in Mitzrayim, too. The Egyptians had the legal rights on their Jewish slaves. But when Hashem said to the Jews, "I am your God and You are My nation," He put His holy name upon us and created a kedusha, a holy attachment to Him. When God established this relationship with the Jewish People, their holiness canceled all monetary claims against

them. The Egyptians could no longer make any claims upon them. The pshat of the pasuk of *Anochi* is, “I am your God, and this gave Me the right to take you out of Egypt and gave you the ability to leave from there.” Hashem’s sanctification of the Jewish nation superseded all other claims.

The Indestructible Kedushas Yisrael—the Inner Crux of Freedom

Our relationship with God produces kedushas Yisrael. The holy Jew cannot have any mortgages placed upon him, because he is God’s property. The Jewish People gained a new level of sanctity, which voided all other claims. From then on, all other claims are absolutely null and void!

This is the essential indestructible point of the Jew. It is the point at which the Jew connects to his God. This holy point is what keeps him free and does not allow him to become a permanent slave. The Jew must be freed in the seventh year because it is the year of that seventh point, of the intense, unwavering holiness, the kedusha of a Jew.

At Sinai, the Jewish People said two critical words: *na’ase v’nishma*. Chazal say that the moment the Jews said those words, they became free from subjugation to all empires and kingdoms. They gained eternal national freedom. They also gained freedom from the angel of death. Had they not committed the sin of the golden calf, they would have become an eternal nation whose members would never die.

The Shem Mishmuel explains that this freedom was due to the power of the holiness Hashem bestowed upon them when they said *na’ase v’nishma*. Their acceptance of the Torah established their connection to Hashem, freeing them from all other domination. Even death has no claims upon a Jew when he keeps the Torah. Death itself is a claim, a form of *shibud*, and Jews are free of any and all claims that contradict Hashem’s claim.

The concept of death has to do with the breakdown caused by the sin of the golden calf. We have seven aspects, six plus one. If we would have kept the Torah, we wouldn’t have sinned with the golden calf. We would have had the full seven sides of holiness as the dedicated and unwavering nation of Hashem. All seven levels would have been totally free of any claims. This is why no nation or even the angel of death would have been able to dominate us. Unfortunately, though, we did sin with the golden calf. There was a breakdown and disconnect from our true holiness. All external sides of our being were polluted, damaged, and profaned. They lost their special holiness.

However, that inner point, the core identity of the Jew, did not become contaminated—even at the time of the golden calf.

Good Intentions Preserve the Inner Point of Holiness

The Shem Mishmuel explains that the golden calf itself was an external sin. The Jewish People felt frantic due to Moshe’s disappearance. They were influenced by the *eirev rav*, a large group of Egyptian non-believers. The Jews made and served the golden calf because they were deceived. They meant well, but their actions were misguided.

When a person sins with good intentions but with improper actions, he sins only on six levels. His whole external expression may be sinful. His inner core, however, remains unsullied. His true inner self is pure and holy. After the sin of the golden calf, the Jews lost their external freedom and holiness and became subject to slavery—externally. As a result, foreign nations were able to dominate them throughout history and drive the Jews out of Israel. But that inner, holy core of the Jew is beyond time and space. It is unaffected by our actions. It is not subject to the variations of time and space. The inner core retains its connection to Hashem no matter what and, therefore, the Jew is always free.

Even during the Holocaust and in the concentration camps, the Jew was a slave only externally. But internally, he was the holiest of the holy, as bright as the brightest stars twinkling in the sky. He had the holiness of the people of Hashem. The evil Germans could not touch that. The holy Jewish core was untouched by any external event or circumstance. The Jew, therefore, can never be a slave. He may be forced externally into slavery but, inside, he is free because he is connected to God.

The Freedom to Recover

This is why the slave goes free in the seventh year. He may have been a thief, even stealing millions of dollars. Or he experienced a social failure and sold himself into slavery. Nonetheless, he works for only six years, not for seven. This calamity does not touch his inner self. He is a child of Hashem, and he retains the holiness that keeps him free.

This connection to Hashem, which gives us our freedom, is the critical element of a Jew. Maintaining our connection to and feeling the holiness of God takes us beyond time and space. Our occasional downs don’t touch our deepest essence.

The thief denies God’s vision, he thinks God doesn’t see him, and thus he steals. The other kind of slave, the

destitute person, has lost hope and thinks he has no future, and so he sells himself. He has fallen into melancholy and depression. Hashem, though, can always give us strength to accomplish. These two people have had breakdowns, but they are only external breakdowns. Internally, a Jew is still strong because he is a child of Hashem. He comes from Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov. He can be a servant only for six years. In the seventh year, he must go free.

Jewish Holiness—Unblemished Throughout Harsh History

Much of the world that we live in has been harsh to us, with pogroms, ridicule, and hatred that the wicked of the nations have showered upon us to this very day. This is the experience of the six days of the week, the six sides of reality. The Ramban says that history will have only six sides. According to the Gemara that he cites, the world that we know of, with all of its problems, will exist for only 6000 years. Then, in the seventh millennium, Mashiach will come. He will bring the world to new recognitions, including seeing God's connection to the Jewish

Mi ki'Amcha Yisrael

Mrs. Michal Horowitz

In this week's sedra, Mishpatim, we are introduced to many, many mitzvos that govern the daily life of a Jew and Jewish society. In the aftermath of Matan Torah, and the great Revelation at Sinai, the Torah now teaches us how to live in the every day, the 'non-inspiring,' 'non-revelation' times in life.

The mitzvos include (and are not limited to!): The laws of an eved Ivri and eved Canaani. Work for six days and rest on the seventh. Work for six years and allow the fields to lay fallow in the seventh. One may not curse, nor hit, his father or mother. A doctor has permission to heal. The laws of a goring ox. The compassionate and kind treatment of a convert, widow and orphan, and others destitute in society. Details of the shalosh regalim. The prohibition of not accepting a meritless, slanderous report. One must stay far away from falsehood. Do not mix milk and meat. Do not eat otherwise kosher meat from an animal that has been torn in the field. Do not offer sacrifices to gods of others. Do not charge interest when lending money. Be a nation of holiness. Do not accept bribes, for bribery blinds the eyes of the seeing and makes the righteous crooked. Do not pervert the judgement of a destitute person in his

People. This is the seventh day of the week, the seventh millennium of the world that will bring with it ultimate, full redemption. The seventh millennium and beyond is an *olam haba*, a future world, which humanity will soon see. Shabbos is the miniature of this redemption epoch.

We now understand why the parsha begins with the episode of *eved ivri*. The laws of *eved ivri* explain the very first of the Ten Commandments. This parsha explains why Jews must be free. They cannot be both existentially and essentially enslaved. Internally, we are free, because we are the holy people of God.

These words are so powerful, so compelling, and so overwhelming. Let us hope that we will be able to access our inner holy core, our deepest connection to Hashem, our God. When we do, we will access freedom to keep the holy Torah properly and the holy Shabbos properly. With our holy souls connected to Hashem through the holy Torah and all of its mitzvos, we will merit the holy era of the messianic seventh millennium.

dispute. Bring bikkurim (the first fruits) up to the Beis Ha'Mikdash (Shemos, chapters 21,22, 23).

An overwhelming number of mitzvos in the sedra deal with interpersonal relationships, and guide us as to how to treat others with care and compassion.

The pasuk tells us:

כִּי-תִרְאֶה חֲמוֹר שֹׂנְאֶךָ, רֹבֵץ תַּחַת מִשְׂאוֹ, וְהִדְלִיתָ, מֵעֹזֵב לוֹ--עֹזֵב תֵּעֹזֵב, - *If you shall see the donkey of someone you hate lying under its burden, will you refrain from helping him? You shall surely help along with him (23:5).*

How much gadlus the Torah demands of man, that he is commanded to help his enemy when the donkey of his enemy is struggling under his burden! Onkelos fascinatingly explains:

אֲרִי תִּחְזִי חֲמֵרָא דְסִנְאָךָ רֹבֵיעַ תַּחַת טוּעֵינְיָה וְתִתְמַנֵּעַ מִלְּמִשְׁבַּק לֵיהּ - *when you see the donkey of your enemy crouching under its burden, will you refrain from helping him? You shall remove what is in your heart against him, and unload with him.*

How is it possible to help your enemy? Only if you remove the animosity in your heart against him, will you truly be able to assist another Jew.

See how much Hashem desires our *achdus* (unity), *ahavas Yisrael* (love of fellow Jew), *areivus zeh la'zeh* (sweetness towards one another), and to be literally (in the case of the struggling donkey) *nosei b'ol im chaveiro* (carry the burden of our fellow along with him, thereby easing his burden).

I was reminded of this week's sedra, the strong focus on mitzvos *bein adam la'chavairo*, and this specific pasuk and Onkelos' important teaching earlier this week. My husband spent this past Monday evening in Manhattan, at a hospital doing the mitzvah of bikkur cholim. He left late at night and on the drive home, while on the highway, a tire blew. Baruch Hashem he was able to make it off the highway to a side road. 10:00pm at night. Alone. Dark. With a completely flat tire. He called me and said he put in a call to insurance (who provides roadside assistance) and they replied that it would be 60-75 minutes before someone would arrive... Right away, I suggested "What about calling Shomrim?" After a moment of thinking, he said, "It's not Shomrim, it's Chaveirim!" "Right," I said, "Chaveirim!" He said, "I'm too far away from them." I said, "Maybe they have a Queens division. You have to try." He said, "Okay, I'll try and call them."

At 10:17pm, my husband messaged on our immediate family chat, "I called insurance company and Chaveirim. We'll see who comes first." At 10:20pm (three minutes later), he messaged, "Chaveirim just called. Can be here in about 5 minutes." At 10:31pm, he wrote "He's here:)" At 10:51pm, my husband posted (on our family chat only) a selfie and wrote, "Meet Avraham (name has been

changed), who left his home at 10:30 to help another Jew he doesn't know and didn't even want to be in the picture. He wouldn't take any money but said we can donate to Chaveirim. And now he has to run to another flat tire."

Anochi Hashem Elokecha, I am the L-rd your G-d who took you out of the land of Egypt from the house of slavery (20:2). The Anochi of the RS"O encapsulates our entire existence as ovdei Hashem; every thought, word and action we do and take must be guided by Torah, mitzvos and ratzon Hashem.

But the definition of an eved Hashem is not only one who can keep the first half of the dibros (*bein adam la'Makom*), it is one who understands that the second half of the dibros (*bein adam la'chavairo*) are just as integral, important and holy as the first half. There cannot be one without the other (hence, when Moshe came down and saw the nation sinning at the Golden Calf, he threw down BOTH halves of the luchos).

We must strive to remove any animosity in our hearts towards our fellow Jews, so we can always be there for each other in our times of needs (and times of rejoicing!). And when we remove any animosity and replace it with *ahavas Yisrael*, there will be room in our hearts to learn the lessons of bikkur cholim, *chaveirim* and beyond.

As my children replied to my husband's messages: "Unbelievable. *Mi k'amcha Yisrael*. Truly." "It's amazing" "tell me one other religion this would happen in wow bh get home safe abba" And as I replied, "Wow what a great lesson and chizuk for us all. How amazing is our nation.

Is There Secular Morality

Rabbi Moshe Taragin

Can Morality exist outside of religion? This question has been debated throughout history, addressed by ancient philosophers such as Plato and Socrates, as well as by modern thinkers such as Kant and Dostoyevsky.

Unquestionably, we possess the capacity for moral thought and decision making even without religion instruction. Prior to Matan Torah, criminal behavior in Man was severely punished. For his crime of murder, Kayin was condemned to nomadic wandering, while a morally dissolute world was washed away by a global flood. A ruthless Egyptian tyrant was punished for enslaving and torturing our people. Even without divine instructions,

humans are expected to act upon basic moral instincts and their innate sense of right and wrong. Evidently, human beings enjoy an internal moral compass and are held accountable for immoral behavior. Hashem's laws aren't necessary for moral integrity.

For many secularists this moral impulse exists independent of Hashem. Immanuel Kant proposed the shared ability of humans to reason, as the basis for moral behavior. Modern, post-Darwinians highlight evolutionary foundations for unselfish behavior. Altruism to others elicits reciprocal generosity which greatly improves our common chances of survival. Similarly, selfless acts are

necessary to form larger groups or herds, which in turns enjoy greater odds to survive the evolutionary process. Secular utilitarians believe that humans possess an internal tendency to act in a manner which effects the greatest amount of happiness for the greatest number of people. For all these secular moralists, a deeply lodged instinct drives moral behavior. Religion isn't necessary for morality. As Albert Einstein wrote in 1930: "A man's ethical behavior should be based effectually on sympathy, education, and social ties and needs; no religious basis is necessary."

Religious people acknowledge these instincts, but trace them to a divine author. Hashem implanted us with Kant's reason, with Darwinistic evolutionary instincts, and with a utilitarian desire to effect maximal good. What secular moralists define as moral intuition unrelated to Hashem, religious people trace to divine programming. Morality may exist without divine instruction, but it cannot exist without divine engineering.

Though Hashem created innate moral sensibility within the human heart, he also delivered His word and His system of halacha, and expects us to shape our moral experience to that system.

Our double tiered system of morality, one instinctive and one legal, is reflected the two very different passages which bracket the Torah's account of Matan Torah. In parshat Yitro, in the section immediately preceding the delivery of Torah, Moshe erects a rudimentary judicial system to enforce law and order. He also counsels people "from morning till evening" about ethics and social virtues. Even prior to giluy Shechinah (divine revelation) and to the emergence of a legal system, moral instincts motivated us to improve our personal behavior and to assemble an ethical society.

The passage immediately after Har Sinai, contained in parshat Mishpatim once again details moral responsibilities and ethical consciousness. The very first section delivered after Matan Torah details the laws of slaves, damages, legal litigation, general law enforcement and social welfare for weaker members of society such as widows, orphans, converts, and financially disadvantaged. Moral behavior is the foundation of religious experience and is commanded prior to the laws governing festivals, sacrifices and religious rituals. Even though we had displayed moral sensibilities prior to Sinai, our moral system was now updated based on the divine will and Hashem's revealed word. Even though humans possess an internal moral instinct, halacha alters

and improves the texture of our moral experience.

How does the added divine layer of morality affect and enhance moral experience?

Objective Standards

Sustained moral behavior requires absolute standards, infinite reference points to guide our decision making. Moral challenges are complex, and we can easily justify selfish behavior by gauging them against social standards. Over time, social standards decline tempting us to calibrate our own moral code based upon these relaxed social expectations. Employing relative standards of morality, we can easily validate dishonest or unethical behavior. This leads to gradual moral erosion, the type of which we are witnessing in many modern Western societies.

Hashem's will provides immutable moral expectations which aren't impacted by social or historical context, challenging us to surpassing and absolute moral behavior.

Worse than slowly eroding moral standards, secular moralism also encourages subjective morality, in which there is no absolute moral truth, only the truths that a particular individual or culture happen to believe in. Without absolute "good" and "evil" even heinous crimes can be justified, and all sense of right and wrong becomes discarded.

Religious morality sets objective and fixed absolutes, yielding a more durable and stable moral experience.

Decentralizing Human Ego

When struggling with moral questions, human beings are often caught between two powerful internal forces. One is our innate desire for altruism, generosity, and selflessness. Alternatively, we are also powerfully driven by ego and self-interest, intensely preoccupied with serving our own needs. In this battle of wills sometimes our ego wins out diverting us from moral behavior in preservation of our own interests. Humans may possess an innate moral compass, but they also possess a strong and hungry ego.

Religious experience is predicated upon decentralizing our ego and our needs, while submitting human interest to a higher being. Once ego is decentralized moral behavior becomes more natural. Successfully submitting our needs to Hashem, promotes our ability to serve the needs of others. Once the self is decentralized moral behavior is more easily achieved.

Divine Image

Hashem fashioned Man as the masterpiece of His creation. He created us in His likeness, vesting us with distinctive

features which no other creatures enjoy. We refer to these qualities such as intelligence, creativity, speech and consciousness as Man's divine image. Hardship and suffering depletes divine image and its potential and our moral behavior restores it. Moral acts are performed not just altruistically, but out of duty to repair Man's divine gift. Moral acts are part of a divine mission and not just a social service. Through our charity and generosity, we partner with our creator in sculpting a more perfect world.

Morality motivated by the divine image extends moral interest beyond the individual, extending it to the social arena. For this reason, religious morality is responsible for social and political evolution. Belief in Man compels us to construct societies which preserve human dignity and freedom, allowing Man to express his talents without economic encumbrance or political repression. Religion forces us to think of the larger social calculus or morality.

Divine Surveillance

What happens when human moral spirit falters and our discipline weakens? Human beings are weak by nature and when left to their own moral instincts will often come up short. Religion establishes accountability to an Omniscient God who observes all human behavior. Almost every moral imperative in the Torah is suffixed by the admonition that

Giving Hashem Nachas

Rabbi Efreim Goldberg

The final section of Parshas Mishpatim completes the story of Ma'amad Har Sinai. We read:

ויבא משה ויספר לעם את כל דברי ה' ואת כל המשפטים, ויען כל העם קול אחד ויאמרו: כל הדברים אשר דבר ה' נעשה.

Moshe came and related to the people all of Hashem's words, and all the laws. The entire nation responded with one voice, saying: All the things that Hashem spoke, we will do. (24:3)

Rashi maintains that this section appears out of chronological sequence, and actually took place before the pronouncement of the Aseres Ha'dibros and the presentation of the laws in Parshas Mishpatim. According to Rashi, when the Torah says that Moshe told the people "all of Hashem's words, and all the laws," this refers to the mitzvos they were commanded before coming to Mount Sinai – the seven Noachide laws which are binding upon all mankind, and the mitzvos presented at Mara, several weeks before Matan Torah (Shabbos observance, honoring

Hashem redeemed us from Egypt. Namely, He is part of history, punishes the wicked and surveils human behavior. This divine scrutiny establishes moral accountability and braces our behavior. Even when moral instincts fail, we still stand in the presence of Hashem and must behave in accordance with His expectations.

In our moral journey we aren't alone. Hashem delivers absolute standards and watches and registers our behavior.

Moral Role Models

So, we believe in human morality, but also in divinely legislated moral law. We should build our moral consciousness upon each of these two pillars, both human instinct and divine law. Often, religious people smugly dismiss secular morality arguing, as Ivan Karamazov asserted in Dostoyevsky's novel *The Brothers Karamazov*: Without God, everything is lawful. This is factually untrue and to assert such is condescending. We should be inspired by moral courage even when exhibited by non-religious individuals. Ironically, it is often easier to identify moral courage in those who express outside of religious practice. Just the same, our moral code is formatted by the will of Hashem and is unalterable. Religious people should be inspired to act morally based upon their inner voice as well as the divine command.

parents, para aduma, and a number of civil laws).

The Ramban (24:1), however, disagrees. In his view, the Torah here follows chronological sequence, and the events told at the end of Parshas Mishpatim occurred after Ma'amad Har Sinai and the presentation of the laws earlier in this parsha. Thus, according to the Ramban, the phrase ויאמר משה ויספר לעם את כל דברי ה' ואת כל המשפטים which Moshe had just now heard from Hashem.

One of the arguments advanced by the Ramban against Rashi's understanding of the pasuk is the word ויספר ("related"). The Ramban writes: ולא יאמר ויספר אלא בחדשות – this verb is used exclusively for the relating of new information. The Torah would not use this word in reference to Moshe's reviewing with the people the mitzvos they had already learned and with which they were already familiar. Necessarily, then, the Torah refers here to the new material which Moshe had heard, the laws of Parshas Mishpatim.

Rav Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev, in Kedushas Levi, offers a beautiful explanation in defense of Rashi. He writes that Moshe did not simply review the mitzvos which the people had already learned, but rather explained to them something about their mitzva observance:

היה מספר לעם גודל הפעולה שפעלו ישראל בקיום ה' מצות
ובמצות שנצטוו במרה והאיך שהקדוש ברוך הוא משתעשע בקיום
המצות.

He was telling the people the greatness of the impact which Yisrael had through the fulfillment of the seven [Noachide] laws and the mitzvos they were commanded in Mara, and how the Almighty delights in the fulfillment of the mitzvos.

Rav Levi Yitzchak explains that Moshe was informing Benei Yisrael how valuable and precious each and every mitzva act is. He was telling them האיך שהקדוש ברוך הוא משתעשע בקיום המצות – that every mitzva we perform brings Hashem great nachas, immense joy and delight. He was impressing upon them that our mitzvos matter, that every good deed we do has great significance. Every time we get ourselves out of bed in the morning for minyan, we bring Hashem nachas. Every time we speak a kind word to our fellow, we bring Hashem nachas. Every time we feel an

impulse to react angrily and insult a family member, but we restrain ourselves, we bring Hashem nachas. Every time we are inclined to share a juicy piece of gossip, but we keep quiet, we bring Hashem nachas. Every time we are about to open a website that should not be opened, we bring Hashem nachas. Just as a parent beams with pride every time a child acts properly, whenever a child makes the right decision, when a child displays maturity and responsibility, so does Hashem receive nachas from us whenever we do the right thing.

The Ramchal concludes his magnum opus, the Mesilas Yesharim, with the prayer, ולעשות, ונזכה לתת כבוד לשמו, ונחת רוח לפניו – that we should have the privilege to bring Hashem honor, and to bring Him נחת רוח. We often speak about our desire to enjoy nachas from our children – but we must also strive to bring nachas to Hashem.

We need to realize that everything we do matters. We might not be perfect, and we are not expected to be perfect, but each time we get it right, we bring Hashem great joy and delight – and knowing this should bring us great joy and delight, as well, and motivate us to continue striving to bring Hashem ever greater nachas.

We Are Commanded to Volunteer!

Rabbi Yehuda Mann

In many high schools around the world there is a requirement that seems to contradict itself mandatory volunteer work! A student must volunteer a certain number of hours per year in order to graduate. Does this make any sense? If it is mandatory, how can it be “volunteering”?

It is interesting to note that in this week's parshah the Torah tells us that about something that is optional, but at the same time mandatory: “If you lend money to My people, to the poor among you...” (Shemot 22:24, JPS 2006). Rashi explains: “Rabbi Yishmael said: wherever ‘if’ occurs in Scripture it is used for an act the performance of which is optional, except in three instances, of which this is one. (Rosenbaum & Silberman tr. 1929/1934)” Meaning, although the verse sounds optional, it is in fact mandatory. In that case, why did the Torah write it in a way that makes it seem optional?

Rabbi Yehudah Loew, the Maharal of Prague, writes in his Gur Aryeh commentary (Shemot 2022) that the Torah wrote it in a way the sounds like it is optional, despite its

being mandatory, to tell us that although we are obligated to follow this commandment, Hashem wants us to do it of our own free will. Hashem doesn't want us to be kind to our fellow Jews and support them only because we are commanded to do so. He wants us to develop a sense of sensitivity, empathy and compassion towards our friends. The purpose of the mitzvah of chesed is not that we just help the other person but rather that we ourselves will change and become better people.

The Rambam says in the Mishneh Torah that “a blessing should be recited before fulfilling all positive commandments that are between man and God, whether they are mitzvot that are obligatory or are not obligatory.” (Hilchot Berachot 11:2, Eliyahu Touger tr.) Rabbi Yosef Karo (Kesef Mishneh ad loc.) learns from the Rambam that we don't recite a berachah on any mitzvah between man and his friend, like tzedakah. And the question is: why? Why don't we recite a berachah before performing mitzvot like tzedakah, honouring parents and visiting the sick?

In an essay in his Haggadah shel Pesach, Rabbi Yisrael Meir Lau, the former Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi of Israel, explains that this is because in every berachah we say “*Asher kidishanu b’mitzvotav v’tzivanu*” meaning that we are doing this because we are commanded. However social mitzvot are expected to be performed not because of the commandment, but rather because of us becoming better people and ultimately recognizing that this is the right thing to do. That’s why we don’t recite a berachah for mitzvot between man and his friend.

The Rambam seems to be consistent with this approach in his other writings. In his introduction to Pirkei Avot (Chapter 6) he brings a question that philosophers have debated: What is better; to have a negative inclination and overcome it, or to not have the negative inclination at all? Is it better to want to eat a nonkosher item and overcome our negative inclination, or not to desire the nonkosher

food at all? The Rambam distinguishes between social commandments and mitzvot mediating our relationship with Hashem. In mitzvot between man and Hashem it is better to want to eat the nonkosher food, to want to violate a Shabbat prohibition but restrain yourself because of the word of Hashem. But in mitzvot between one person and another, if a person has a negative inclination that makes him want to kill, want to steal, want to commit crimes and he restrains himself – Rambam says that something is wrong with him, because a healthy person naturally doesn’t want to do these bad things.

When we learn in this week’s parshah about the many and various mitzvot between human beings, let’s remember that these are not commandments we are compelled to do, but rather they are values that we are trying to instill in ourselves.