Mishpatim: Shemot (Exodus)

What's it all about?



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After the revelation in Sinai, God gives the Israelites a series of laws addressing a wide array of subjects. They are warned, for example, not to mistreat foreigners, and not to mix milk with meat, and are commanded to pray and instructed in the observance of their festivals. In total, the parsha contains 53 mitzvot, or commandments — 23 commanding the Israelites to behave in certain ways and 30 prohibitions warning them against other undesirable behaviors.

God also promises to bring the people to the Promised Land, and warns them against succumbing to the temptations of idolatry. The Israelites reply by saying “We will do and we will hear all that God commands us,” and **Moses climbs up Mount Sinai and remains there for 40 days and 40 nights to receive the Torah from God**.

> "The people responded, 'We will do and we will learn everything that God has spoken.'"

Take a deeper dive

This week's parsha is every screenwriter's nightmare: how do you follow up the biggest, most explosive, most spectacular story ever delivered? Last week, we received the Ten Commandments; what might the Torah do for an encore?

The answer is strange, stunning, and spectacular. It's a parsha that swiftly and seamlessly casts aside Moses and Aaron, and shifts the focus, for the first time in Torah, from bigger-than-life protagonists to the real heroes of the Torah: **All of us.**

There are 53 mitzvot in the parsha, an overwhelming number. They arrive fast and furious, at a staccato pace and in great detail. Why follow up the narrative majesty of God speaking from the mountaintop and delivering ten inspiring ideas with this barrage of "thou shalts" and "thou shalt nots?"

Midrash Tanchuma, a masterpiece of Rabbinic interpretation, attempts an answer by explaining that the Torah is telling us here that its very purpose isn't to be studied in seclusion, by very educated scholars who do nothing all day long but parse the sacred words of God. **The Torah's purpose is to serve as a guide to life, to be a tool for people to use as they strive to make the world better and human life more meaningful and joyous.**

And the Israelites, hallelujah, get the message right away. Their response is one for the ages: *Na'aseh ve'Nishma* — we will do and we will hear. The doing comes first, the hearing later, a guarantee of an ever-improving life of action and righteousness.

This response inspired some of our most storied ancestors. One time, the story goes, a student came to the great 19th century sage, the Kotzker Rebbe, to discuss this verse. It made no sense, said the student; why wouldn't the Israelites first hear and understand, if only to better do and obey? The student concluded by telling the Rebbe he was troubled because he felt that he, too, couldn't really understand the ways of HaShem. "A God I *could* understand," the Kotzker Rebbe quipped, "I would not be able to believe in."

That's a very apt summary for Parashat Mishpatim. Let us learn its many mitzvot, but let us also remember that **our job is to do first and only then understand, because when we act according to God's words, we make the world both holier and more whole.**

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