

Rules to Live By?

By Rabbi Rain Zohav

Originally written for the Washington Jewish Week.

This week's Torah portion is Mishpatim, Exodus 21:1 – 24:18

Reading Mishpatim is a little like discovering a box in grandma's attic labeled "Rules to Live By". Opening up the box I find: civil and criminal law codes, diaries, moral teachings, instructions for holidays, signed documents and a few oral history tapes. Some seem idealistic, some too harsh, some seem to ameliorate an existing institution without abolishing it, and some seem extremely applicable to today.

Here is a small sample of the laws included in Mishpatim. I leave it to your judgment which of the above categories might describe each one:

"When you encounter your enemy's ox or ass wandering, you must take it back to him." (Exodus 22:4)

"When you acquire a Hebrew slave, he shall serve six years; in the seventh year he shall go free, without payment" (*Exodus 21:2*)

"He who strikes his father or his mother shall be put to death" (*Exodus 21:15*)

"When a man lets his livestock loose to graze in another's land, and so allows a field or vineyard to be grazed bare, he must make restitution" (*Exodus 21:4*)

One commandment that is repeated in Mishpatim twice and in Torah 36 times especially calls out to me to be applied today. This is the commandment: "You shall not wrong a stranger or oppress him, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt" (*Exodus 22:20*). Rashi writes "Any (use of the) term *ger*, stranger, (in the Torah means) a person who was not born in that country...". It seems obvious that we Jews, of all people, should be compassionate of "the stranger". But Rabbi Shefa Gold, in her book, *Torah Journeys*, thinks it is not so simple. She writes, "Those who suffer oppression often go on to oppress others". This is why we need this mitzvah to be repeated so often in Torah. The second repetition in Mishpatim adds another layer. We are told not to oppress the stranger because we "know the soul of the stranger" from our own experience. What does it mean to "know the soul" of anyone? I think it means that we need to open our own souls to others' suffering. When we do that we can learn to be compassionate to all.

Discussion starters:

For adults:

Do any of the mitzvot quoted above seem to you to be “too idealistic”?

Do any of them seem to cry out for application today?

Are there any that you think are too harsh?

In our society today are there Jewish teachings that you think hold us to a higher moral standard than the surrounding culture?

Are there American laws that are too harsh and should be abolished or changed?

Are there American laws that are on a higher moral level than that generally practiced in the world?

For families:

What rules in your home, school or work do you think are fair and help make everything go better?

Are there any rules that you disagree with?

Why would the Torah ask us to help our enemy?

Who are “the strangers” today in America?

Is this a different teaching from what we are taught in American schools?

How can we be safe and also be kind to strangers?

