



Rabbi Yoshua Gordon

The Talmud discusses this week's Torah portion more than any other—by a wide margin. Many of the largest tractates are based on it.

Mishpatim is filled with laws—civil, tort, damage, and business laws, among others—and contains 53 of the 613 commandments, nearly 10% percent of all the mitzvot in Torah.

The second verse instructs, "Should you buy a Hebrew slave, he shall work [for] six years, and in the seventh [year], he shall go out to freedom without charge." This is the first of the 53 laws in this parshah.

A Jewish man can become a slave in one of two ways. The first is if he sells himself into slavery. Why would a person do that? For financial freedom. He's economically overwhelmed; he can't handle the credit card debt or the toxic mortgage anymore. He can't handle the pressure and the stress, so he decides to sell himself as a slave. What does he get in return? He gets a lump sum of money and the commitment of his new master to support his wife and children; no more stress and no more pressure.

The second scenario in which a Jewish man can become a slave is if he is caught stealing and cannot afford to repay what he stole.

In Torah law, there is no imprisonment for theft. By contrast, in most contemporary legal systems, those caught stealing are sent to prison. But what do they gain from their prison stay? Often, they are housed and fed on the taxpayers' dime, and during their stay, they hang out with other thieves and learn how to become better thieves. What was gained? Absolutely nothing.

According to Torah law, the first thing a person must do when caught stealing is make restitution. He must repay what he stole; often he is ordered to pay double. If he stole \$1,000, he must pay back \$2,000. What happens if he doesn't have that money? What happens if he says, "Two thousand dollars?! I have eleven cents! If I had \$2,000, I wouldn't steal in the first place!" In that case, the court can sell him into slavery for a maximum of six years.

Now, here is a fascinating detail of this law: If, at the end of the six-year term, the man says, "I like it here! I know my six years are up, but I don't want to go home. All my needs are met, I don't have any pressure, and I don't have any stress. I want to remain here," his master must take him to the Beit Din – the Jewish court, where they pierce his ear with an awl, and with that, he remains a slave. That's the halacha, the law.

"Why was the ear chosen for piercing rather than another organ?" ask the Sages. "Since it was the ear that heard on Mount Sinai, 'You shall not steal,' yet it went ahead and stole, let it be pierced; since it was the ear that heard on Mount Sinai, 'For unto Me are the Children of Israel servants, they are My servants,' yet it threw off the heavenly yoke and replaced it with the yoke of man, let it be pierced."

Whose Slave Will You Be?

When we consider how this person is treated it becomes clear that "slave" is not really an accurate way to describe his arrangement, and he'd be better described as a "servant" or "bondsmen."

But the fact is that he is serving a human master. And G-d wants a Jew to be a servant only to Him. Serve G-d and don't serve anyone else. We're not made to serve other people. Since the Exodus from Egypt, we are free people. The only one we should serve is G-d.

Genuine Liberty

Looking at this through the lens of Kabbalah and Chassidism, we can understand why this particular commandment was chosen to be the first mitzvah in Mishpatim. The Jewish slave and its laws represent the commitment of the Jew to G-d. When we properly study and internalize these laws, we will recognize that the reason we are free people is because we serve G-d. And if we serve G-d, we must serve Him exclusively, because true freedom exists only when you serve G-d.

The great sage Rabbi Joshua the son of Levi taught in the Mishnah: Every day a booming voice resounds from Mount Sinai proclaiming, "Woe is to the creatures who insult the Torah." For one who does not occupy himself in Torah is considered to have insulted the Torah.

The Torah was given by G-d on Mount Sinai, and a Jew is too busy for it? He has no time for it? We find ourselves running here, there, and everywhere. We've got things to do, places to go, people to see. Says the voice booming forth every day from Mount Sinai: It's insulting!

The Baal Shem Tov asks: if there's a voice booming forth from Mount Sinai every day, who hears it? Do we hear it? Our neshamah hears it, the Baal Shem Tov explains. It's a voice that our subconscious soul hears.

Rabbi Joshua continued: The verse says, "Now the tablets were G-d's work, and the inscription was G-d's inscription, engraved on the tablets."5 Don't read "engraved" (charut) but "liberty" (cheirut), for there is no free individual, except he who occupies himself with the study of Torah.

The Ten Commandments liberate us. Torah liberates us. It frees us. Although many people think that studying Torah and observing commandments confines and restricts them, the truth of the matter is that it is the human condition that we all serve somebody. Some people serve the boss at work, some people serve their spouse, some people serve the government. Many people serve their own addictions and become slaves to themselves, slaves to their passions.

If you want to be truly free, connect yourself to Torah, the Mishnah advises. If you serve G-d, you are free. When you serve G-d, you serve no one else, and that gives you the strength and the ability to be free.

"Humankind was born to toil." Those who think that they were born to be on vacation are making a mistake.

Yet there are various kinds of toil. A person can toil in Torah, investing effort, studying, researching, and being occupied with Torah.

A person can toil in prayer, with prayer being his primary function in life. He prays in the morning, he prays in the afternoon, he prays at night. He meditates, he contemplates. He is always praying in one form or another.

People can toil in their occupation—they can be workaholics—working from morning until evening, slaves to their work.

If we toil in Torah, we don't have to toil in our occupation. Yes, we have to make a living, but it does not have to enslave us.

And so, rule number one of all of the rules of Mishpatim: be a Jewish servant—a servant of G-d. We have to rise above everything else. G-d says to go to work, so we have to go to work. G-d says to get married, so we have to get married. G-d says to have children, we have to have children. Whatever G-d says, we do. Why do we do it? Because we're liberated. Because we're connected to G-d. Because we know that G-d is watching over us. And that is the truest liberation that a Jew can attain.

Redemption Millennium

"Should you buy a Hebrew slave, he shall work [for] six years, and in the seventh [year], he shall go out to freedom without charge."

According to our sages, these six years symbolize the six millennia. Kabbalah describes the entirety of human history as a seven-millennium "week," comprising six 1,000-year "days" of human labor in developing G-d's world, and a seventh millennium that is "wholly Shabbat and rest, for life everlasting"—the era of Moshiach.

When we properly invest our efforts and energy in the service of G-d throughout these six millennia, then when the millennium of Moshiach arrives, we can truly enjoy it—celebrating our era of "Shabbat."

May we merit to enter the seventh millennium – the Moshiach millennium. The world has come full circle, and we are ready for his arrival. May we merit to greet him speedily in our days! Amen.

At Sinai, we declared, "We will do and we will understand!"

Angels descended from heaven and placed two crowns upon our heads. One crown for "We will do." The other for "We will understand."

But that's puzzling.

We were wise to accept the Torah even before we understood, to preface "we will do" to "we will understand." Because we knew well the One who was giving us this **Torah**. That gives us one crown. And the other?

The other is the crown for the understanding that comes after doing. Because when your understanding comes before your actions, and your knowledge has nothing to do with how you live, then you know nothing.

But when you begin with a resolve to carry out whatever you learn, then your understanding soars to an entirely new level.

For that, you deserve a crown, for you have transcended yourself.

Joke

A Jewish immigrant with Polish ancestry went to the DMV to apply for a driver's license. He had to first take an eye sight test. The optician showed him a card with the letters 'C Z W I X N O S T A C Z.'

"Can you read this?" the optician asked.

"Read it?" the Polish Jew replied. "I know the guy!"

Story time

The Jewish community of Frankfurt was in mourning for their beloved Chief Rabbi. The rabbi had no heir, but he hadn't left his flock entirely without recourse. A few days before he died he had called the Jewish leaders together and instructed them on finding a replacement. The potential candidate would have to pass a test consisting of three complicated and difficult questions, involving very deep Torah concepts. "Whoever answers these questions," the rabbi had stipulated, "should be appointed the Rabbi of Frankfurt."

The search began after the funeral. A delegation was chosen of three of the most distinguished leaders of the community, and they set out to find their candidate. As a major Jewish center, Frankfurt required a very special personage; only a scholar with the highest level of piety and erudition would do.

The first city the delegation arrived at was Cracow, which boasted many Torah scholars. Surely it wouldn't be too difficult to find someone there who could answer the three questions.

On the day they arrived they learned that a great celebration would be taking place later that evening. The son of one of the wealthiest Jews in Cracow was becoming Bar Mitzva, and the entire community was invited. The members of the delegation from Frankfurt were also invited to attend. In the middle of the festivities the Bar Mitzva boy stood up to deliver a speech, as is customary. The hall fell silent as everyone listened attentively.

The boy's sermon was very deep, revealing an unusual mastery of Torah knowledge and proficiency. It was, in short, the most impressive Bar Mitzva speech that anyone had ever heard. The boy began by postulating three difficult problems; when the members of the delegation realized that they were the same three questions the rabbi had raised, they looked at one another in amazement. They could hardly believe it when the boy proceeded to answer them skillfully one by one. All of the guests were impressed, but the members of the delegation could barely contain their excitement. Clearly, the hand of G-d had steered them in the right direction. All they had to do was find the tutor who had prepared the boy for his Bar Mitzva; whoever he was, it was obvious that he must serve as the next Rabbi of Frankfurt.

They thanked G-d for having led them to a suitable candidate so quickly.

Indeed, it wasn't difficult to locate the boy's teacher. As they learned from the boy's father, his name was Reb Yosef Shmuel the Teacher.

They found Reb Yosef Shmuel in a corner of the study hall surrounded by little boys. The teacher was dressed simply and rather poorly, but they didn't hesitate to approach him.

"We'd like to speak to you about an urgent matter," they said, but Reb Yosef Shmuel was busy. "Not now," he replied. "I am an employee, and it wouldn't be right to shirk my duties." Reb Yosef Shmuel resumed his teaching.

If anything, the teacher's answer made the members of the delegation even more hopeful. This was obviously a man of ethics, G-d-fearing and devoted to his job. They agreed to speak with him later that day.

When they came back they got quickly to the point. They told him about the passing of their rabbi, and the three questions he had established as a test for his successor. "So now you're going to be our rabbi!" they concluded.

They were shocked, however, when Reb Yosef Shmuel declined their offer most adamantly. He wasn't looking for honor or glory, he explained, and he already had a job as a teacher from which he derived great satisfaction. Politely but firmly he turned them down. All their pleas fell on deaf ears. They begged and implored the teacher, and even promised him an impressive salary, but to no avail. Reb Yosef Shmuel could not be budged.

The members of the delegation prepared to leave Cracow, dejected and forlorn. Who knew if they would be able to find another qualified candidate? They had just left the outskirts of the city when their carriage broke down, and for several hours they had no choice but to sit by the side of the road until it was repaired. All of a sudden a messenger caught up with them; he had come directly from Reb Yosef Shmuel on a special mission.

The messenger revealed that the teacher had suddenly taken ill, and seemingly overnight had arrived at death's door. Indeed, the doctor who was summoned asserted that he had no more than a few days left to live. When Reb Yosef Shmuel heard this pronouncement he had cried out, "Master of the Universe! If You really want me to serve as Rabbi of Frankfurt, I'll do it!"

No sooner had he uttered these words than the mysterious illness began to dissipate. A messenger was immediately dispatched to intercept the delegation from Frankfurt and inform them of his decision.

The joy of the Jewish community of Frankfurt knew no bounds. Divine Providence had clearly demonstrated that Reb Yosef Shmuel was meant to be their leader, and he was formally appointed Chief Rabbi of the city a short time later. And everyone marveled at the prophetic vision of their previous Chief Rabbi, who had provided his flock with such a worthy successor.

Parsha Summary

The name of the Parshah, "Mishpatim," means "Ordinances" and it is found in Exodus 21:1.

Following the revelation at Sinai, G-d legislates a series of laws for the people of Israel. These include the laws of the indentured servant; the penalties for murder, kidnapping, assault and theft; civil laws pertaining to redress of damages, the granting of loans and the responsibilities of the "Four Guardians"; and the rules governing the conduct of justice by courts of law.

Also included are laws warning against mistreatment of foreigners; the observance of the seasonal festivals, and the agricultural gifts that are to be brought to the Holy Temple in Jerusalem; the prohibition against cooking meat with milk; and the mitzvah of prayer. Altogether, the Parshah of Mishpatim contains 53 mitzvot—23 imperative commandments and 30 prohibitions.

G-d promises to bring the people of Israel to the Holy Land, and warns them against assuming the pagan ways of its current inhabitants.

The people of Israel proclaim, "We will do and we will hear all that G-d commands us." Leaving Aaron and Hur in charge in the Israelite camp, Moses ascends Mount Sinai and remains there for forty days and forty nights to receive the Torah from G-d.