

David McCabe

D'var Torah

MISHPATIM

My parasha, or Torah portion, is "Mishpatim," which means laws. It is filled with moral and ethical mitzvot, which are laws pertaining to how to treat other people. For instance, the parasha tells us to respect our parents, or that when a man strikes his slave and damages a part of his body, he must set the slave free. The parasha also says that if a miscarriage results from a man pushing a pregnant woman, and damage occurs beyond a miscarriage, "the penalty shall be life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand...."

These laws came from G-d via Moses. G-d helped Moses save the Israelites by performing miracles, so now the people would listen and follow G-d's laws. Not only that, people were more likely to pay attention to laws from G-d, or from Moses, whom they knew was in contact with G-d.

This parasha seems to put parents on a higher level than their children. One can infer this because the punishment is death for insulting them. Perhaps the parasha is saying that our parents and elders deserve extra respect. After all, we were in some way created by G-d, but we wouldn't be here if our parents hadn't created us. In contemporary society, we are not put to death for dishonoring our parents, but parents remain a necessary part of our lives. They care for us and raise us and teach us. If we insult them, it's like saying "I don't need your guidance," but we do. Even as we get older, we have to respect our parents.

These "Mishpatim" remind us that we need to respect other people. They do this by listing punishments for specific crimes, but I think respect begins with treating people well in the first place. You can do this by doing community service. You can also do this on a small scale by just picking up something for someone, or helping someone with homework. You may not have made a huge difference, but you still helped someone and that feels really good. What matters is not the size of the mitzvah but that you have chosen to perform it. Everything we do is a choice and every choice has a consequence. The way we treat other people is not just about respecting them, but it is also about how we respect ourselves. When we are mean to other people, we are losing our own self-respect even if we don't realize it.

The ethical mitzvah I chose was to do community service. One weekend, I went and painted a playground in Spanish Harlem with my dad and people from JPMorgan Chase, where he works. Every year, as part of their Global Days of Service program, employees all around the world perform good deeds, or mitzvot, in their communities, all on the same day. When we got to the playground, it was covered in dirt and it didn't look very nice. All of the structures had smudges all over them. All the volunteers did their part of the painting and shared a lunch with the neighborhood kids. The kids were all ready to play when we were finished, but the paint was still wet. Those kids have as much a right as anyone else to play in a nice playground. As a commentator from *Chumash Etz Chayim* writes, "The Torah repeatedly insists on the fundamental human dignity of [everyone]."

The final topic my parasha talks about is the treatment of slaves. Despite the fact that we were slaves in Egypt, the Israelites kept slaves of their own. This was typical because slavery was a part of that time period, as much as cars and the internet are part of ours. My parasha makes it very clear that slaves should be fairly treated. To put this in context, the commentators of *Chumash Etz Chayim* tell us that Israeli slavery was not "the Egyptian model of slavery, a condition of cruel, permanent bondage. [The parasha] deals with people who find themselves obliged to sell their labor for a fixed amount of time to repay a debt or as the result of a bankruptcy." This does not excuse the fact that they kept slaves, but it does explain it. Thousands of years later, the world is still trying to break away from slavery. The Declaration of Independence was referring only to white men when it said that "all men are created equal." Today all Americans enjoy equal voting and property rights, but other countries still permit forms of slavery. I believe that we all deserve to be treated equally, even if some people enjoy higher social and economic status. I also think it's unfair that the Hebrew slaves

received better treatment than other slaves of their time. The Hebrew slaves got protective laws, but other slaves did not. If the Torah was written today, I can't imagine it would list any acceptable kind of slavery.

Treating people fairly, doing community service, and respecting other people are all mitzvot. The Israelites needed these rules to function and we still follow them today. Taken literally, my parasha has little relevance to contemporary society, but the basic ideas of respect and equality are still quite relevant.

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