

A Thought for the Week - Mishpatim

- Jay Kelman. Maintaining a strong relationship with G-d

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Rabbi Jay Kelman

How does one come close to G-d? How can one hold on to great religious experiences as we go through the daily routine of life? This was the problem facing the Jewish people as the events of Sinai faded. How would they be able to use Sinai to infuse their life with holiness? The Torah hints at an answer with the long series of laws that follow on the heels of Sinai. These laws focus on interpersonal relations and are the key to Divine service. They progress from those norms, which prevent the breakdown of society to laws that reflect the ethical demands placed on a holy nation. We begin with those laws, which carry the death penalty such as kidnapping, cursing parents and progress to the prevention of bodily assault and property damage and even the rights of animals. The Torah then moves to detailing the meticulous nature with which we must guard our friends possessions; to the obligation to loan money (interest free) to those in need; to helping our enemies and protecting the rights of the foreigner, a revolutionary concept in the ancient world. Helping man is thus transformed to Divine service.

At the conclusion of these interpersonal laws the Torah then details a small number of laws regarding our relationship to G-d. Shmitta, Shabbat, the Pilgrim festivals and Kashrut. Having created a just society we are now ready to worship G-d. Yet interestingly even these mitzvot seem to focus on the interpersonal and not the Divine aspect. Six days you shall do your work and on the seventh day you must rest so that your donkey and ox will be able to rest and your maid's son and the foreigner will be able to rest (23:12). The Torah tells us that we must observe Shabbat lest we exploit those who work for us or work our animals too hard. No mention is made of G-d creating the world in six days, and resting on the seventh day. Immediately preceding this verse the Torah tells us that we must observe the sabbatical year so that the needy among you will then be able to eat from your fields just as you do, and whatever is left over can be eaten by wild animals (12:11). Missing from this explanation is the standard one given in Leviticus that it is G-d's Shabbat a way to acknowledge as does Shabbat, G-d's ownership of the world. If one truly believes G-d created the world and rested on the seventh day then you will treat your workers with dignity, respect and consideration for their needs. If you wish to demonstrate that to G-d is the land and all therein then we will gladly share our produce with others. Thus those who are lacking in their observance of the mitzvot between man and man are unable to worship G-d properly.

In fact all mitzvot between man and G-d are meant to enhance our observance of the mitzvot between man and man. On its most basic level belief in G-d means you will act properly towards G-d's creations. But let us look at some specifics. The mitzva of prayer teaches us the importance of community because optimal prayer requires community presence. The laws of Passover teach us that we must fight for freedom for all. Belief in Mashiah requires that we try to perfect the world. Fasting on Yom Kippur helps us to understand the need to alleviate hunger in the world. The laws of modesty teach us the importance of respecting the privacy of others. Kashrut teaches that there must be limits to our desires. Sitting in a sukkah teaches us the temporary nature of life

and thus inspires us to act now. The list goes on and on.

Divine service by definition means improving the lot of man. The path to Sinai and Divine revelation is right in front of us each and every day. By helping bring a smile to someone's face we bring ourselves closer to our Creator. Shabbat Shalom!