

# Mishpatim: Af Eileh MiSinai

- Nisson Shulman.

Samples of all laws of Torah. Which should go first? Samson Raphael Hirsch zt"l, laws protecting the weakest and most fragile of society. That is why we are such a charitable people, Rambam, "Ki htzedaka siman latzadik zerah Avraham Avinu... Geulah and tzedakah

My text is the first letter of the first word of this week's portion, the Vav of Veeleh. Our Rabbis teach that this little word, the shortest in any language, a simple line which cannot stand alone but is a prefix of another word, means "and". When we were children we were taught in school never to begin a sentence with "And". And yet this entire Torah portion begins with this letter VAV, which together with the words that follow means "And these are the laws".

Every letter and sequence of letters in the Torah has some special meaning. The Rabbis always recognized this and explain that whenever a portion begins with the word and it is meant to connect that portion with what has gone before. This portion is no exception.

Rashi explains clearly: Ma harishonim miSinai, af eleh miSinai; "Just as the previous portion is from Mount Sinai, so is this one". They are all one portion. They are connected with this Vav and form one entity.

Why? What does this teach us?

It teaches that at Sinai there were more than Ten Commandments. Indeed, the Ten Commandments are no more than categories into which fit all the rest of the Torah. And now the details begin. Mishpatim are laws and statutes teaching us the judicial system of Judaim.

We would expect that in this portion we would find samples of most, if not all the laws of Torah. That is so. Laws against physical harm and protecting the integrity of property, laws of parental duty, and social obligation are here included. Torts, damages which one must pay another if he harms their person or their property; responsibility for the safe use of one for one's own property; commercial transactions, such as the responsibility you bear to another if given something to watch, or if you hire something, the prohibition against tale bearing; the whole judicial process, the responsibility of witnesses, of judges, the integrity required; The sabbatical year; the holidays of the Jewish year; first fruits; the prohibition against idolatry; the laws that have to do with our entry into the Promised Land; the worship of God and His service, and even the relation of God to man through revelation; it is all there, all in this week's portion. Through these laws we can picture that the entire Torah was given at Sinai, as indicated by that tiny letter of the vav at the very start of the Torah reading today.

If I had my choice as to which of this catalogue of commandments of God I would put at the head of the list, I might choose the statements about the worship of God, His revelation. Or I might choose the judicial process, the way judges judged, the enormous effort to acquit someone accused even of the most terrible crimes, or the fact that a witness may not incriminate himself so that in a Jewish court a confession is never accepted. These laws seem very important to me.

Or I might choose those laws that have to do with everyday commerce, or the family, or the gifts of charity symbolized by the first fruits. Or, thinking of the Haffetz Hayim who wrote whole volumes about guarding our tongue from speaking evil, the laws of lashon hara should head the list. The Jewish holidays, the cycle of the year might also be high on the list.

Yet the portion starts with none of these.

Samson Raphael Hirsch points out that the portion starts with protecting the rights of the most powerless of all people in society, a person who has sunk so low that he or she finds themselves indentured to another; Now this may come about if someone has stolen and cannot pay back the value of his theft. In Jewish law he is not put in prison, but in certain exceptional cases is indentured to pay for the theft, and incidentally to be rehabilitated by living with another family. If he is married, he takes his family with him and the master must support them too. The Torah takes special pains to teach us that even this situation has severe limits, that he cannot be indentured for more than seven years, that at any time he can buy out his contract and achieve freedom if he finds the money or is given the money to do so.

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch emphasizes that the Torah wants us to know that protecting the weak and the unfortunate, the orphan, the widow, the poor, even protecting the person who deserves servitude and severely limiting that, is the most important element of our faith. All the rest is supremely important. But seeking out the helpless and the unfortunate is first and foremost. So says Samson Raphael Hirsch.

I suggest that this attitude above all else has inspired us to do charity as no other people on earth, inspiring Maimonides to write, *Ki hatzedaka siman latzadik, zera Yisrael avinu*. Because of this, when we celebrate our deliverance from Haman and his plot to destroy our people in old Persia, we observe the day with feasts and gifts, but also and above all with charity to the poor. We welcome opportunities to fulfil such responsibilities, and we honour those who are foremost in this service.

In fact, the Rambam laid down three principles of Tzedaka. The first, is that it is the hallmark of the Jew, *siman latzadik*. . . The second is that the Judaism will be acknowledged and the Almighty recognized by all people, through Tzedaka, *Vein kise yisrael mitkonen vetat haemet omedet elea bitzedaka, sheneemar bitzedaka tekonani*. The third, is that the destiny of Israel will be fulfilled, and geulah will come, only through Tzedaka. *Veeyn Yisrael nigalin ela bitzedaka, sheneemar, Tziyon bemishpat tipadeh, veshaveha bitzedakah*. The care and concern we must show for the Shavey Yisrael, those who have returned to Zion, and who now suffer economic loss as well as daily terror, must come to mind when we hear these words, words that remind us of our duty and obligation at this time, to visit Israel, support her in this time of need, and care for the widows and orphans created by this recent period of terror.

In merit of this the Geulah will come, Israel will be established, and all who share in this will be considered righteous.

We have just recited the prayer for the new month. Through this prayer we plead for ourselves, our community, for our people everywhere: May the Almighty grant us all, life, peace, health,

reverence for God and fear of sin, prosperity, and honour; a life marked by a love of Torah so that we be inspired to fulfil the commands we read about this day; a life in which the innermost desires of our hearts, for peace – tranquillity – and geulah shelema - be fulfilled. AMEN.