

Dot Com: Downloading Religion

- David Gutterman.

Parshat Mishpatim is even more pointed and specific. It deals with the laws that are specifically related to man and his fellow man. This powerful truth needs to be taught and learned specifically this week. After all, last week we stood at Sinai experiencing the immediacy of revelation. And yet, on the heels of Sinai - in its immediate path and journey is this week's Mishpatim. Rabbi Gutterman explains why

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On the plane returning from the Land of Israel this week, I read with keen interest the front-page article in the Hebrew paper, Haaretz. It proudly proclaimed that the search engine Google will be fully operational in Israel in her native tongue within 18 months. There was another article on the front page announcing that the high-tech firm Intel, will be investing in the Gaza Strip.

Interesting front-page news from the Holy Land this week is about dot-coms. Don't misunderstand me - I am not averse to high tech nor do I eschew dot-coms. In fact, somehow, and don't ask me how - it is allowing us to have this 3-minute conversation. And somehow - and don't tell me, it allows you to liberally use the "D" button at your discretion. That said, I am reminded of another front-page dot-com and after you read this, I promise you that you will never Google the same way.

Our Torah reading, Mishpatim, is power packed. Mishpatim means laws and we have a plethora of them this week. As the architect, Mies van der Rohe remarked, "G-d is in the details."

Recall John Adam's letter to F.A. Van der Kamp? He wrote, "If I were an atheist and believed in blind eternal fate, I should still believe that fate had ordained the Jews to be the most essential instrument for civilizing the nations...They have given religion to three-quarters of the Globe and have influenced the affairs of Mankind more, and more happily than any other Nation, ancient or modern."

Yet Hebrew does not have an adequate word for religion. That is, if you define religion the way that most dictionaries do as a "system of creed or faith." The Hebrew word used for religion is "dot." "Dot" is a very specific word and roughly means, in accord with the laws and actions that have been prescribed. As one theologian so aptly suggested: "Though in the main, Christianity is a religion of creed, Judaism is a religion of deed." Jewish life is do -com par excellence.

The Chassidic rebbe, Rebbe Simcha Bunim of Parshischa points out that Mishpatim is even more pointed and specific. It deals with the laws that are specifically related to man and his fellow man. This powerful truth needs to be taught and learned specifically this week. After all, last week we stood at Sinai experiencing the immediacy of revelation. And yet, on the heels of Sinai - in its immediate path and journey is this week's Mishpatim. Why so?

Don't think that religion is the fire, thunder and lightning of Sinai alone. Don't think that religion

is relegated to the rare, and perhaps evanescent and fleeting moments of hearing G-d speak - as we collectively did last week. Don't think that religion is all about the relationship that one develops to the transcendental or Divine alone. Religion is dot, and dot is also mishpatim and mishpatim is about cultivating a sensitivity and relationship to and about the 'other.' Listen to Reb Simcha Bunim's final comment - it is powerful. The front page of our parasha, so to speak, begins, "And these are the mishpatim that you should put before them." Says R. Simcha Bunim, the cultivation of the relationship "between man and man comes even before the cultivation of the relationship between man and G-d."

Is it any wonder that the Torah reading of Mishpatim immediately follows on the heels of Yitro, the parasha of Sinai and the so-called Ten Commandments?! As Jews, we are about the values and visions as understood by our texts and traditions, in a word, we see the world through the spectacles of our "dot." And as Jews, this translates into a special and sacred holding that we have for each other as part of, what Rabbi Soloveitchick so beautifully and meaningfully termed, "the covenantal community."

Dot-Com (community) - it's on the front page this week.

Shabbat Shalom,

David