



Torah Reflections on *Mishpatim*

Exodus 21:1 – 24:18

The Torah portion Mishpatim (meaning “legal pronouncements”) is filled with extraordinary details for how we are to interact in the course of business, human relationships, and the like. For example, we are told, “When a person opens a pit, or digs a pit and does not cover it, and an ox or donkey falls into it, the one responsible for the pit must make restitution; that person shall pay the price to the owner, but shall keep the stricken animal.” (Exodus 21:33) The specificity of this Torah portion has led some to ask why is this all so important? The answer is found in the same Torah portion. We are told “You shall not oppress a stranger, for you know the feelings of the stranger, having yourselves been strangers in the land of Egypt.” (Exodus 23:9)

In any - even the most loving - relationship, fragile moments of discomfort can be moments of estrangement; a loved one does or says something out of character, or “not like themselves.” And in that loving awkwardness, the detail of returning to an even keel is important. In these moments, we often yearn to know the right thing to say or do. How often do we find ourselves thinking or saying to a loved one: “Just tell me what to do, what to say, and I’ll do it.” In many ways, reconciliation is in the details. The detail of Mishpatim gives us a template for using detail to move through the inevitable difficulties that arise even in the healthiest, and most loving relationships.

Hospitalization often leaves us with time to reflect on how we have interacted with others. Sometimes, there may already be a difficult moment in the hospitalization itself. After all, hospitalization itself can be an estrangement from one’s daily routine, one’s independence, even one’s ability to make decisions.

You might consider in this time of hospitalization, that whatever your reflections on relationships, the deepening is in the details. If you are troubled, you might consider a talk with the hospital chaplain, your

rabbi, the hospital social worker, or trusted friend. If you find yourself reflecting on satisfying times, share the details of those as well. And remember that the details of life often help us to see the bigger picture.

Another example of how the details of Mishpatim can support our efforts to enhance relationship is: “Six days you shall do your work, and on the seventh day you shall cease from labor, in order that your ox and your ass may rest, and that your servant and the stranger may be refreshed” (Exodus 23:12). Sometimes, even in the midst of important self-reflection or reconciliation efforts, we need a rest from the labor of it; for often in a moment of rest comes an answer that completes our yearning. And the wisdom of this pronouncement is that our rest benefits others as well.

May your reflections, your attention to the details of your relationships, and your rest bear healing fruit!

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