

## Teaching Towards Depth

אשר תשים לפניהם

Rabbi Daniel Fridman

Mishpatim 5779

Through the first seventeen parshiyot in the Torah, the Sefer Ha-Chinukh enumerates exactly forty-one commandments. In contrast, this week's parsha alone contains, according to the Chinukh's enumeration, an astounding fifty-three mitzvot. The Chinukh subdivides the mitzvot in the Parsha into two distinct sections; the first twenty-four are referred to as the Mishpatim, the laws, whilst the final twenty-nine belong to a distinct section opening with the mandate to extend interest-free loans, *im kesef talveh et ami*.

Together, these two sections, spanning one hundred eighteen verses of the Torah, cover an astonishingly broad scope, from the basics of business ethics, torts and civil procedure, to cases of seduction, prohibited foods, and even witchcraft. In sum, there are twenty-three affirmative obligations (mitzvot aseh), and thirty prohibitions (lo ta'aseh). Mastering each of the fifty-three mitzvot in their own right, let alone determining the textual and logical connections between one section and the next, presents, to understate the matter, a formidable challenge. If learning Mishpatim, deeply, seems ambitious, transmitting it to a largely uninitiated group, such as the Jewish people were at the time of the revelation of these laws, might strike one as sheer fancy.

Yet, in the single introductory verse of the parshah, this is precisely the pedagogical responsibility with which Moshe is tasked. 'And these are the laws that you should place before them', in the original, אשר תשים לפניהם. The Mekhilta of R. Yishmael quotes R. Akiva as interpreted the verse in the following manner; Moshe, do not satisfy yourself with teaching them two or three times, by rote, so that they can repeat the matter, without explaining the underlying reasons and their more profound explanations. Rather, penetrate the depths of each matter with them, and place it as a set table, 'שולחן ערוך', before them.

While our initial reaction to the Mekhilta might be grateful delight at identifying precisely where R. Yosef Karo took the title from for his code of Jewish law, and its significance, we ought to pause to reflect for a moment on the challenge which Moshe was being given. It was, apparently, insufficient for him to educate the people in such a manner that they would simply know what to do. Rather, practical knowledge of the halakha, while vital, was meant to be transmitted in a manner which stressed both depth and conceptual understanding.

The pursuit of depth, it seems to me, is driven by a triple impulse. First and foremost, if one understands the underpinnings of the mitzvot, observance and adherence to these commandments

becomes, in many cases much more likely. As our Sages put it, *talmud mevi lidei ma'aseh*, Torah study drives observance. Second, the desire to understand not just what one is required to do, but, as much as is humanly possible, the logic which undergirds the Torah, one increases not only one's observance of mitzvot but one's Torah study as well.

Third, and perhaps most importantly, when one sees the Torah not just as a very long instruction manual, but, as much as is humanly possible, with insight into the total vision with which Hashem gave the Torah, one's relationship with God is commensurately deepened and intensified. One can achieve the ultimate form of *deveikut*, the optimal fulfillment of the Mishnah in Avot, "even one who sits and studies, the Divine Presence dwells with Him" It was not for nothing that Rambam himself underscored the contingent relationship love of God has with Torah knowledge. Every Jew, one hopes, yearns for this quality of religious life. As such, every teacher ought to make the solemn obligation given to Moshe at Sinai, **אשר תשים לפניהם**, his very own.