

**Sermon | Parshat Mishpatim**  
January 29, 2022 | כ"ז שבט תשפ"ב  
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I invite you all to call to mind a moment in your life when you felt that you were on top of the world, when you were proud, inspired, and connected to the people or the place in which you found yourself. Try to harness the gravity of that moment...and now try to remember what you did the next day. Your memory of that next day is probably less vivid, not quite as palpable as the moment when you felt on top of the world, perhaps you do not remember it at all. According to Chip Heath and Dan Heath, authors of *The Power of Moments*, "Great experiences hinge on peak moments. We'll call them 'defining moments': short experiences that are both meaningful and memorable." For the Heath brothers, a defining moment has four elements: elevation, pride, insight, and connection.

Last week, in Parshat Yitro, we read about and even reenacted a defining moment in the history of our people: standing at Sinai and hearing *Aseret HaDibrot*, the Ten Commandments, the people's transformative experience of revelation. The moment rose above the routine; it commemorated a moment of pride for Moses, God, and Israel; it was transformational; and it created a bond amongst those who were present at the foot of the Mountain of God. Sinai was a paradigmatic example of a defining moment. After such an intense and powerful experience, we turn to this week's *parsha*, Mishpatim.

Sinai had lightning, thunder, blasts, smoke, and the voice of God. Do you know what this week's *parsha* has? Laws about how to treat a fellow Israelite servant; penalties for disrespecting father and mother; the laws of the ox that gores its neighbors; and a litany of other seemingly mundane ordinances which we would refer to as matters of civil law. On the

surface this anything but a Sinai moment; it is more akin to a moment in a rather uninspiring law school course. How could it be that the drama of last week's *parsha* leads to the lackluster casuistic law of this week's *parsha*?

The reading for today begins,

וְאֵלֶּה הַמִּשְׁפָּטִים אֲשֶׁר תָּשִׂים לִפְנֵיהֶם:

These are the rules that you shall set before them.<sup>1</sup>

Did we not hear about some very significant rules last week? What is so important about these laws that they should follow the Ten Commandments? Citing a *midrash*, Rashi teaches that these introductory words, “and these are the rules,” come to add to that which was mentioned above—just as the first ten utterances of God, the Ten Commandments, were given to the people at Sinai, so too were these laws—about servants, and oxen, and harvests, and laborers—so too were these laws given at Sinai, by God, to Israel. No, we do not reenact the Sinai moment by standing when we hear these words, as we stood last week when we heard the Ten Commandments, but the rabbis would like for us to imagine that all of this was shared at Sinai. This, too, is part of the Sinai moment.

There are other *midrashim* that support this idea that all of these *mishpatim*, these ordinances and rulings, that they too were part of revelation and shared at Sinai. It is clear that the rabbis had a concern about how we would receive these laws. After all, they are not ritual or necessarily religious in nature. They sound like laws that any human society might reasonably develop in order to maintain order and establish equity. In fact, many of these laws have parallels in other ancient near eastern legal codes; they are not unique to ancient Israel.

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<sup>1</sup> Exodus 21:1.

And the rabbis knew that! They were aware of this and thus they sought to elevate these laws to be on par with those given in last week's *parsha*: the law of the Israelite servant is as significant as the law of observing Shabbat; the law of the goring ox is as significant as the law affirming the unity of God. All of these were given at Sinai.

Sinai moments do not just happen on their own, however. There is preparation and anticipation. The Israelites had to experience liberation from Egypt, passing through the Reed Sea, journeying for seven weeks to reach Sinai. It was not an easy journey. They had to go to war with Amalek. They had to learn how to be a people and live on their own, now under the staff of Moses, rather than the rod Pharaoh. Sinai moments require this sort of preparation.

Today is a Sinai moment, and it required much more than seven weeks of preparation. Today we honor and celebrate eight adults who committed themselves to studying with me for two years to reach this day: Karen Bolnick, Wilma Braun, Natasha Hurwitz, Melissa Kutner, Jennifer Meyers, Victor Schneider, Kristin Schulman, and Frank Vernet. These eight individuals in our community committed to weekly study to reach their own personal Sinai. Our class began just days after the world went into lockdown. For almost the entirety of our course of study we met on Zoom, and finally we gathered in person last fall. But Zoom fatigue did not impact this group—they were deeply committed to this effort, and have all ascended Sinai today to demonstrate that revelation did not end when the Israelites journeyed on from Sinai. Parshat Mishpatim teaches us that even if today is a Sinai moment, tomorrow has the potential to be one again. When we reach one peak, we do not necessarily roll downhill thereafter. Instead, we search for the next mountain to climb. This group of learners are all accomplished individuals. They have families and careers. They are already deeply committed to their own

Jewish journeys. Today is a Sinai moment for them, and for all of us who are here to witness their achievements and celebrate their success. We hope and pray that tomorrow, or perhaps the next day, also holds the potential to be a Sinai moment, a revelation. As long as we remain receptive and dedicated to the journey, we will never stop receiving Torah—the grand and the mundane, the dramatic and the staid. Today, the Adult B’nai Mitzvah Class of 2022/5782 affirms their commitment to lifelong Jewish learning, and to serving as role models for the rest of the community.

This group knows that revelation can happen any day, even on Zoom! If you read enough, study enough, listen enough, then something is bound to jump out at you from the page, from the screen, from a song, from a melody. We may not literally be standing at the foot of Sinai, but it is our responsibility as Jewish people to create the conditions in which revelation can continue through us. Today we are at Sinai, and I hope that tomorrow we can be there again.

In recognition of their achievements, each of the participants in this cohort will receive from the congregation a JPS Tanakh, the Hebrew Bible in its original Hebrew text with English translation. Just as the Hebrew Bible does not end with the fifth book of the Torah, but continues on into the Prophets and the Writings, so too may their learning extend far beyond this day, and may reading the sacred words of your Tanakh be for you as another Sinai moment. The Adult B’nai Mitzvah class did not only march towards Sinai for their own revelatory experience. Rather, they have also tried to lay the groundwork for those who will follow in their footsteps. For their Mitzvah project, this group is making a generous donation to

the Rabbi Safra Adult Programming Endowment to provide us with the means to create Sinai moments for others. For them, today is Sinai. For the next group, tomorrow.

If you are still skeptical of this interpretation of the *parsha*, I offer you one final perspective. Rabbi Baruch HaLevi Epstein, also known as the Torah Temimah, considers this interpretation of the rabbis and says that the key to understanding all of this is at the end of last week's *parsha*, where the Torah says, "So the people remained at a distance (וַיִּעַמְדוּ הָעָם מֵרָחֹק), while Moses approached the thick cloud where God was (וּמֹשֶׁה נִגַּשׁ אֶל-הָעֶרְפֹּל אֲשֶׁר-שָׁם (הָאֱלֹהִים))."<sup>2</sup> Just before Moses receives the laws of this week's *parsha*, he is invited by God into a thick abiding cloud on the mountain, where God and Moses would commune, but where the people would be shielded from the overwhelmingly palpable presence of God. And that is why both these laws and those were all given atop Sinai. The challenge for all of us is to muster the courage to follow Moses into the cloud—not to remain at a distance, shielded from the power of Sinai—but to be with Moses and with God, to make today and tomorrow moments where we stand at Sinai, where we continue the process of revelation, where we receive Torah and then permit it to animate our lives and bring holiness to the world.

May we all strive to be like the individuals we honor today, daring to step forward into the cloud with Moses and God, willing to experience revelation, and prepared to share that experience with the world. Shabbat shalom.

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<sup>2</sup> Exodus 20:18.