

Covenant
Parashat Mishpatim
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Today we read of Israel and God standing in a liminal moment: an in-between time. We know, as we stand newly liberated, what we leave behind. But the future is a mystery. It is, in some regards, uncomfortable to be in a liminal moment. The unknown is often unsettling. But at the same time, this liminal moment at Mount Sinai is a moment of unique intimacy with God. Never again will we hear God's voice, never again will we stand so united. And so this liminal moment is a moment rife with the potential for blessing. Let this state of the union, this reflection on where we are and where we might be going, serve as an invitation to bring that potential for blessing to life. Let this serve as encouragement to approach the mystery with confidence and with good will. Let's try this. Let's stand again at Mt. Sinai. This is existential, not intellectual. It is a **feeling** exercise, not a **thinking** exercise.

How long were we at Sinai that first time? Last week we read of our arrival and our encampment: On the third moon of the Israelites' going out from Egypt, on



this day did they come to the Wilderness of Sinai. And they ...came to the Wilderness of Sinai and Israel camped there, against (opposite) the mountain.

But then a phrase that seems superfluous: Israel encamped in front of the mountain – even though we just read *they* encamped. Alas the significance is lost in translation: The verbs in these verses: **they** entered, **they** journeyed, **they** came to, **they** encamped, all plural forms in this matter-of-fact telling.

This time the verb is in the singular, not plural form: *Vayichan sham Yisrael*: There Israel (singular) encamped. Rashi comments *am echad b'lev echad*: One people, with one heart. It was when Israel coalesced as one, with one aim, one heart, one belief, that God determined they were ready to be given Torah.

Let's think about what that means: every Jew, every single member of the covenant between the Kadosh Baruch Hu and Israel was there at Sinai. You were there and I was. Every past and future generation. Jews by choice, by birth, and by default. Good, pious, righteous Jews, and all the rest of us. We all stood at Sinai – millions and millions, countless Jews – as one people with one heart.

Seeing our history this way explains the sensation we might have when we meet a Jew, or learn that someone we know is Jewish – that familiarity, that sense of ah, yes, I knew there was something I recognized in you. I met you at Sinai; we were all there.

And what a strange, enigmatic series of events unfolds as we gathered.

“Mount Sinai was all in smoke because the Lord had come down it in fire...and the whole mountain trembled greatly. And the sound of the ram’s horn grew stronger and stronger.” It is chaotic. It is terrifying. It is our moment in the presence of God.

God speaks to us directly – whatever that could possibly mean – and utters ten Statements. Ten truths or commandments or demands. And shaken to our core we respond: Please don’t ever do that again. Please do not address us directly, but speak instead through Moses. We can not live through another encounter like this. (I gotta’ wonder if collectively we might like a do-over.)

And so today, in parshat Mishpatim, God speaks to us through Moses. Law after law after law. But don’t be fooled. Even though the speech is mediated, we are still standing at Sinai. This collection of laws in today’s parsha is referred to as the Book of the Covenant. It is not incidental to the ten utterances we read last week; it is not of secondary importance. And now, at last, we read of our ratification of the covenant. Listen to what happens in today’s parsha:

“And Moses wrote down all the Lord’s words, and he rose early in the morning and built an altar at the foot of the mountain with twelve pillars for the twelve tribes of Israel. And he sent the lads of the Israelites and they offered up burnt offerings and sacrificed sacrifices and communion sacrifices....And Moses

took half the blood and put it in basins, and half the blood he threw upon the altar. And he took the book of the covenant and read it in the hearing of the people, and they said, ‘all that the Lord has spoken na’aseh v’nishma: we will do and we will obey.’ And Moses took the blood and threw it upon the people, and he said, ‘Look, the blood of the covenant that the Lord has sealed with you over all these words.’”

We don’t often spend a lot of time on this passage – it’s probably never taught in Hebrew school. But *come on*. This is epic. This is intense. It is an otherwise unheard-of rite – blood is sprinkled on our very bodies. Last week was the hoopla – the smoke and fire and blast of the horn. Last week God revealed the outline of the commandments. But this week, today we drill down and learn the content of those commandments and we ratify: We confirm our agreement to the brit. *We want in*, we say, we are ready for this relationship and God confirms us as beloved partners in eternal covenant.

What does it mean to be in covenant with the Creator of the Universe? This is not an agreement between co-equals. It employs the language of ancient vassal/master treaties. But both parties agree to stipulations and conditions: We will obey G.’s law and not follow other gods. And in return the Kadosh Baruch Hu (the Holy Blessed One) will be our God in every sense – showing us divine protection and offering the comfort of God’s loving Presence.

Please note that we entered the covenant with God not one by one, but as a nation. There is no covenant on offer for us as individuals. Inherent in biblical theology is a presumption of collective identity. In truth, the legal framework of Torah is not concerned with the individual so much as the community. In the biblical world, if a nation as a whole disobeys God then that entire nation is punished. Famine, disease, unrest do not discriminate. There are no cut outs for the singular righteous individual. (Actually the same is true in our day.) Similarly, a community that upholds the brit, that follows G.'s laws and extends lovingkindness generously – all members of such a community are blessed.

When we encamped at Sinai, *am echad b'lev echad*, when we stood beneath that quaking mountain and heard God's voice, and when we avowed, all that the Lord has spoken, *na'aseh v'nishmah*, we will do and we will obey—at each of those moments we spoke as a nation.

Here is the point we must learn: We entered covenant both **as** a people and **to** a people. The biblical character Ruth is likely familiar as the first Jew by choice, the first person who sought to enter the covenant between God and Israel. And how did she frame her desire to enter that covenant? *Ameich ami*—Your people will be my people. And only then *Veilokayich Elokai*—your God will be my God. At Sinai, and ever since, we enter a brit that is not just vertical (between us and God) but is horizontal (between and among ourselves and each other). We

have committed to be in covenant to one another no less than our commitment to covenant with God. One cannot stand without the other.

We cannot live a full Jewish life as an individual. Some of the mitzvot are commanded only to kohanim. Others only to landowners or to mothers of newborns. No one of us can fulfill all of Torah, not as individuals not even within a family. By nature, we are all of us missing something, incomplete. That is the glory of humanity – we need our community to be whole.

I find myself reprising some of the themes I mentioned in my Rosh Hashanah sermon. It feels like a long time ago, but then, as now, we at Temple Aliyah find ourselves in a liminal space – an uncomfortable in-between-time, not knowing what comes next for us. Who will lead us from this bima? Will our leaders have the wisdom and compassion to guide us?

But even in this liminal space, where the old world we knew seems distant and the future unknown, we are still who we always were. We are a modest community, but we remain animated by certain passions. We are a community marked by love of learning. On Shabbat mornings, and at Kiddush conversations after services, at the beginning of board meetings, through adult ed and framing virtually each event, this community turns to professionals: rabbis, cantors, professors, and equally to congregants who reliably step up to share their knowledge their wisdom, their Torah.

We are a community bound by our love for Israel. In days when even saying we support Israel can be controversial we express our support in a myriad of ways: In the changes to our liturgy at every service, in the blue ribbons inside and outside our building, in our renewed connection with Congregation Netzach Israel in the Gaza envelope. Kesher is distributing thousands of dollars raised. In two weeks we will welcome to our bima SIX congregants who have volunteered in Israel since the war began. You won't want to miss these personal stories of the decision to travel to Israel in wartime to bear witness and to assist with a wide range of often unglamorous tasks.

We love lovingkindness. (Loses something in translation.) When not one but two of our Hesed co-chairs were themselves sidelined by medical needs, others stepped forward and Hesed continues unabated to bring soup and a dose of compassion to any family beset by illness or a death or any heartache. We celebrate our children – last week the 4th and 5th graders participated on the bima, and just a few weeks before that we were wowed by participants in Teen Takeover Shabbat. We celebrate sometimes hidden talent among our congregants at the Cabaret and the Purim Shpiel. (And we have – literally -- a whole megillah of celebrations of Purim this year including an adult-only evening in Vash-tee room. Because we love our children, but we also love a night out with just adults.)

We embrace our responsibility to bring justice to the world around us through the Civil Rights trip, the volunteering at the Walker school and the awesome initiatives in Welcoming the Stranger.

And we have been blessed with a rabbinic search committee that worked tirelessly for two years acting with exemplary respect and menschlickite to bring us a permanent rabbi.

Our challenge now, as at the beginning of the year, is to buttress our kehilla, our tribe, by reconsecrating our bonds to something bigger, more compelling, more imbued with holiness than any one of us. This is the moment for reassertion of the community we love over any individual. It is, what Rabbi Sacks calls the move from the solitary self – the **I** to the **we**.

We are bound to one another: By the blood sprinkled on us at Sinai. By our common response – we will do and we will learn. We are bound by our history and by our destiny. I saw you at Sinai. We stood there together and ever since then I am bound to you and to your well-being.