

This Week In Torah *Mishpatim*

What is the purpose of *mitzvot*? Surely the notion of being commanded is a guide for righteous living. Of the 613 commandments that are found in Torah, a majority of them guide us to the limits of what we shouldn't be doing, but still present are the things we ought to be doing as prescribed by God. But there has to be something more than "marching orders" on how to live our lives.

There are 2 ways to better explain this. First is rooted in rational terms by theologian Franz Rosenzweig [1886-1929] who wrote of this in his book, The Star Of Redemption. He described that the *mitzvot* system was a guide for creating an entry point for us to have a relationship with God. Following the *mitzvot* was more than righteous living, it helped prime us for a sacred encounter. Doing them, in essence, makes us ready and willing to experience God in this world. The second way is more spiritual and it comes from the Hasidic sage known as the *Degel Machane Efraim*. Using elements of the kabbalistic and Hasidic traditions, which speak of two qualities of awakening, awakening from on High (*itaruta d'le'eila*), and awakening from below (*itaruta d'letata*), the *Degel* sees the *mitzvot* as given from above but doing them causes God's grace to bubble up from within. He wrote: "Awakening from on High is understood to be an expression of divine grace given freely. It is an outgrowth of God's love, not of our efforts to earn that love. It can be experienced as a peak religious experience that breaks into our lives out of nowhere. By contrast, awakening from below is an outgrowth of our personal efforts and practice, which lay the groundwork for experiencing the Divine. Sometimes we need preparation and awakening to divine service, and we must enclothe ourselves with great love and awe and examine and contemplate the grandeur of the blessed Creator, and only after this do we bind ourselves to the [higher] worlds."

Mitzvot can enhance the spiritual essence that we seek to encounter, a better sense of intersection between the mundane and the sacred. It can help us open our eyes/hearts/souls to better our connection with God. As my father used to say: "when in

doubt, act faithfully and faith follows.” Perhaps that is why we read in this very edra, the phrase: “*na’aseh v’nishmah*” which literally means “we will do and we will hear.”

In the 20th century, there was a rabbi in Israel known as the *Netivot Shalom* or Rabbi Shlomo Noah Berezovsky, the Slominer Rebbe. He wrote that God yearns for a *dira batochtonim*, a special place of dwelling among us. He noted that God does not want perfection but rather the majesty of spiritual awareness is to seek good in sadness and the broken parts of living. Performing *mitzvot*, he would say, is not just in the doing but in the awareness of striving for Divine justice as well as personal clarity to encounter God. A Conservative trained rabbi, Megan Doherty, wrote of our *parasha*: “*Mishpatim* tells that we make space for the Divine when we see the Divine spark in each human, treat each other fairly, and build systems which care for the most vulnerable among us.”

Why perform *mitzvot*? It is God’s command to us but also the training of the soul to be more engaged in the world, the pursuit of God in our lives, and seeing the face of God in another.