

Parshat Mishpatim

Justice and Concern for All

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This week's parsha deals with many laws that the Jewish people are commanded to follow. These laws primarily focus on inter-personal relations, providing guidelines to help us create a society based on justice. However, the purpose of these laws is not just to create order in society. There is an even deeper message that the Torah wants us to understand through the parsha – that every Jew matters.

When one reads the laws of an *eved ivri*, this message is evident.

The Torah says that an *eved ivri* who is already married can be forced by his master to live with a non-Jewish maidservant to produce children. However, this law only applies to an *eved* who was sold by court to pay victims of theft, not to one who elected to sell himself. It may be that the Torah allows this in order to make the sale of such a slave more attractive to potential buyers. This will allow him to earn his money more quickly. He can then compensate his victims and begin his life anew, free from debt and free from slavery.

Furthermore, the Torah (Devarim 15:14) says that after six years the master has to send the slave away with gifts in order to help him rebuild his life. The Sefer HaChinuch explains that all the laws of slaves in the Torah are examples of the kindness and mercy that the Torah shows and also demands of us. It does not matter who you are, says the Torah. If you are a Jew you are important, and deserve to be treated the same as anyone else.

In a similar vein, the parsha deals at length with guidelines to handling cases of damage. Whether someone physically injures someone else or his ox gores another's ox, the Torah stresses the importance of being sensitive to other people and their property. The Gemara in Bava Kama 30a says that anyone who wants to become a *chassid* (very righteous person) should be careful regarding the laws of damages. The Maharal on that Gemara points out that the Gemara does not say that anyone who wants to become a *chassid* should do acts of kindness and give charity. Rather, the Gemara specifically said that to become a *chassid* one needs to be careful about damages. This is because it shows complete piety. Certainly, one can do good to someone else by giving charity every once in a while, but to be constantly on guard that someone else should not get damaged on your account – this shows total concern. It shows that each and every person is very important.

We clearly see from the Torah and Chazal the tremendous importance of being sensitive to other people and their property. Hopefully we can all internalize this message and thereby create a stronger sense of unity within the Jewish community.