

Why does our Torah reading for this week contain a passage from Numbers and another from a parashah we will read three weeks from now? And why the extra Haftarah selections? First of all, this Shabbat is also Rosh Chodesh, when our readings include verses concerning the sacrifices honoring the new month. But it is also Shabbat Shekalim, the first of the four special Shabbatot that span the approximately six weeks until Pesach. Shabbat Shekalim is named for the maftir reading (Exodus 30:11-16), which commands every Israelite man, rich and poor alike, to contribute a half-shekel toward the communal sacrifices. Although this seems to belie the fairness it aims to create, it is actually a crucial step toward developing the sense of unity necessary to create a viable society. Revolutionary in its time, it defined and ensured the equality, and therefore, the dignity of all men. (For women to be thus included is an ongoing process, as we know!)

How appropriate then, is our parashah, which marks a departure from the narrative style that has prevailed until now. Slavery is behind us, we have received the terms of our covenant, and now, we must establish the means to enact and uphold them. In a world of autocracy with fuzzy boundaries between gods and mortals on the one hand, and rigid societal hierarchy on the other, we face the enormous task of creating a law code based on the unique concept of legal equality. I am fond of saying that nothing happens in a vacuum, which simply means that we humans learn from, and influence one another. The Code of Hammurabi is older than our Mosaic laws, and there are indeed definite similarities, but there are also profound differences that derive from our covenantal responsibilities. Whereas law codes similar to or based on the Code of Hammurabi are purely civil, our laws are rooted in accountability to HaShem. Because HaShem, Who created humankind in His image, is righteous and holy, we are obligated to reflect this by being righteous and holy in our own, human fashion. It is this unique spiritual dimension that elevates the value of human life and tempers judgement with compassion. Parashah Mishpatim (Ordinances), also known as *Sefer haBrit* – “Book of the Covenant,” is a thumbnail sketch of the laws defining the broader principles set forth last week in what we commonly call the Ten Commandments. It is a collection of civil and tort law as well as an enumeration of moral imperatives. The former includes the famous and unfortunately often misunderstood *lex talionis* – eye for eye, tooth for tooth, etc. Whereas the Code of Hammurabi and others like it read this literally, the Torah’s wording implies a form of monetary compensation. *Tachat* means in place of, under, rather than for. Because we belong to the One Who created us, we are not permitted to mutilate the body. This prohibition is addressed specifically in other places that deal with pagan religious practices. In addition, maiming the perpetrator does not benefit the victim. “In place of” clearly indicates material compensation. The rabbis of the Talmud, who grappled with the question of why the Torah does not say so specifically, explain it in terms that derive from the principle of legal equality and illustrate it in a comical story: The scoundrel Chanan, having slapped a certain man, was brought before R. Huna, who ordered him to pay the plaintiff half a *zuz*. [Chanan] had a battered *zuz* out of which he desired to pay the plaintiff the half *zuz* [which was due]. But as it could not be exchanged, he slapped him again and gave him [the whole *zuz*]. (Babylonian Talmud, Baba Kamma 37a) In other words, a wealthy person with no moral compass might think nothing of mistreating his fellow humans and then relying on his wealth to buy him out of any obligation toward them. Using *ayin tachat ayin* (eye in place of eye) the Vilna Gaon found another brilliant way to prove this point. Rearranged, the letters immediately under (following) the letters עינ *ayin-yud-nun* spell *keseif* (money): *kaf* under *yud*, *samech* under *nun*, *peh* (*feh*) under *ayin*. One more delightful reason why we should read our Torah vertically like an orchestra score rather than horizontally like a book!

The second section of laws sets forth our highest values: compassion and fairness for the poor, the widowed, the orphaned, and the stranger. Our scriptures, our prayerbooks, and our history admonish us to remember what it is like to be poor, to be bereaved, to be marginalized, and above all, to be strangers. Our hard-won freedom from the tyranny of Egypt carries enormous responsibility to the One to Whom we owe that freedom. Upholding the dignity of all humans, especially the most vulnerable, and acknowledging the sanctity of all life, flora as well as fauna, is a sacred obligation. By virtue of our covenant, we are all sojourners on, and stewards of HaShem’s land, and we are commanded to treat it and all its inhabitants justly and respectfully. Parashah Mishpatim, begins the process of enumerating the laws that define us as a people and teach us how to be worthy participants in our unique eternal covenant. Even if some of them do not apply directly today, our covenant requires us to continually find ways to adapt and carry their principles forward.

Shabbat shalom!