

Parashah Mishpatim (Ordinances), also known as *Sefer haBrit* – “Book of the Covenant,” is a real-world blueprint for the Ten Commandments. It is a set of civil and tort laws followed by laws concerning ethical behavior. The former include the famous and unfortunately often misunderstood *lex talionis* – eye for eye, tooth for tooth, etc. Whereas the Code of Hammurabi reads *lex talionis* as literal, class-stratified retribution, the Torah transforms it into principles of equitable monetary compensation. *Tachat* means in place of, under, not for. Talmud Tractate Bava Kamma 84a makes it clear that maiming the perpetrator does not benefit the victim. The Vilna Gaon found a delightfully clever way to prove this point. Rearranged, the letters immediately under (after) the letters עַיִן *ayin-yud-nun* (eye) in the Hebrew alphabet spell *kesef* (כֶּסֶף money): *kaf* (כ) after *yud*, *samech* (ס) after *nun*, *peh* (פ) after *ayin*. The second set of laws defines our values: compassion and fairness for the poor, the widowed, the orphaned, and the stranger. Our scriptures, prayerbooks, and 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. Given these lofty principles, it may seem illogical to begin with laws about indentured servants. In its most extreme form, slavery is the unconditional ownership of human beings by other human beings, with owners having unlimited power over their “possessions.” The Israelites were delivered from this form of slavery, but other, milder forms still existed. In that world, and far into the modern era, the only recourse for convicted thieves and people in dire financial straits was to indenture themselves to their creditors until their debts were paid. Beginning with rules for the treatment of these individuals is an eloquent reminder that we should never inflict upon others the pain and indignity we endured as slaves to Pharaoh. Alas, there were Jews involved in the slave trade, and we all have violated at least some of the laws outlined in our parashah. Imperfect human beings that we are, we will make mistakes, and there are always moral and spiritual consequences. In the world of Torah, restitution is not punishment for its own sake. It is restorative and pedagogical, and we call it *teshuvah* (return), which entails acknowledgement of wrongdoing, repentance, and making the necessary amends. This Shabbat is Shabbat Shekalim, the first of the four special Shabbatot that span the approximately six weeks until Pesach. Except in leap years, it usually coincides with Parashah Mishpatim, and it always falls just before the month of Adar (Adar II in a leap year), when we look toward Purim and Pesach – a time of remembering and renewal. Shabbat Shekalim is named for the second Exodus reading (from Parashah Ki Tisa), which commands every Israelite man, rich and poor alike, to contribute a half-shekel toward the *korbanot tzibbur*, the communal offerings and the maintenance of the *mishkan*, the communal place of worship. 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 society based on Torah principles. The wealthy cannot buy favor, and this modest amount is affordable even for the neediest. Of course it is technically a tax, but symbolically it is a ritualized statement of inclusion. Revolutionary in its time, it defined and ensured the equality, and therefore, the dignity of all men. (For women it remains an ongoing process, as we know!) It is noteworthy that it is “in atonement for his soul when they are counted, so there not be a plague among them ...” (30:12). Reducing people to numbers nullifies their uniqueness, insults their dignity and ultimately rejects the concept that every human being is made in the image of HaShem. Dehumanization is a political, social, spiritual, and highly contagious plague. The half-shekel transforms a necessary census into a covenantal act of shared responsibility. Furthermore, the half-shekel amount is significant in itself: We not complete in isolation. Each of us has a unique set of strengths and weaknesses, and we can only be whole with the help of others who have what we lack. In short, the half-shekel is the ritual enactment of the laws of accountability introduced in our parashah – an eloquent and beautiful way to teach that justice and holiness depend on mutual responsibility and respect. Introducing the *shmittah* year, Shabbat, and the three pilgrimage festivals (23:10-19) not only ritualizes the laws and principles of interdependence, it also emphasizes our dependence on and covenantal obligations toward HaShem. The *shmittah* year and Shabbat ensure rest and restoration for everyone and everything equally. The three pilgrimage festivals gather everyone in one place to eat, worship, and remember together. They are all harvest festivals, but without Pesach, which also commemorates the Exodus, the others would not be possible. Everything is interdependent and we owe it all to HaShem! John Donne’s poem “No Man is an Island” echoes this concept. Written during a severe illness and in the wake of the bitter Catholic-Protestant conflict in England, it is a plea for unity, connectivity, and solidarity. Its fragmented lines express the sectarian divisions of his time – and ours. In the words of Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi z”l, “The only way to get it together is together.”

Shabbat shalom!