

Mishpatim **Judgments** **Learning to Apply the Word**

Torah: Genesis 21:1-24:18
Haftarah: Jeremiah 34:8-22;33:25, 26
Brit Chadashah: Matthew 17:1-11

When I was typing up this week's Torah Portion, my spell check tried to turn Mishpatim into Mishmash, which means a disorganized heap of odds and ends, thrown together any which way. I wonder if it did that because far too many believers do not integrate G-d's Word into their lives with any degree of consistency. Does your spiritual life look more like a puppy's breakfast than it does like a well constructed house, built firmly on the rock?

Our people had some knowledge of the ways of G-d which came to them from the Patriarchs and from old sections of writing, like Genesis 1-11, which were eventually organized into the 39 books of the Old Testament (or Tanakh). But they had been slaves in Egypt and had probably begun the deadly process of assimilating into paganism and idolatry. We face the same danger in our darkening world and need to be as careful and as meticulous as Moses was when he began to explain how to apply the Ten Words into every area of the people's lives.

In my sermon today, I am going to be talking about the joy and wonder we experienced when we first gave our hearts to the Messiah. This joyful period needs to be followed by a total reorganization of every aspect of our lives so that we are light and salt, without any trace of the former pagan darkness we wallowed in.

Israel now faced a new reality where they went from being slaves to Pharaoh to the newly freed people of YHVH. It was a new world and they had to see it in a new way and they had to live in it in a new way. This is what this section of the Torah initiates and while every possible scenario is not covered, more than enough detail is given to equip believers with a clear understanding of how to apply the Word into new situations which exist beyond the words of the biblical text. The words of the biblical text remain our infallible guide.

The same spiritual principles still apply today and it is our privilege and our duty to build our lives around the Word of our King which never changes – but which should change us and renew us constantly. If the principles of the Ten Sacred Principles are not the foundation upon which we build our spiritual houses, the storms of this life will bring them crashing down.

This particular portion is rich in content and each of the judgments is an application of one or more of the Ten Principles. This morning, I want to briefly zero in on seven features of the longer discussion which Moses had with the people who gathered round to hear how the Word should be applied.

The first has to do with a man who commits a murder on purpose as the result of plotting against his neighbour. There is to be no mercy for this man, even if he clings to big altar of sacrifice. Premeditated murder requires that the murderer suffer the same fate as the one whose life he or she ended. He or she showed no mercy, so mercy is to be shown to them.

Next is a passage which clearly states that a babe in his or her mother's womb has all the same rights as anyone else in our society. In the context, two men are fighting and injure a pregnant woman so that she goes into early labour. If there is no other damage, which means that the baby lives, then the two guilty ones have to pay a fine imposed by her husband.

If there is another accident, which means that the baby is killed or wounded, they must pay for the life they have taken. If the baby has been wounded in the eye, the tooth, the hand or the foot, they are responsible for the damaged and may be obliged to suffer the same wounding they have inflicted. The passage also delves into other sources of damage such receiving a burn, a wound or even a whipping.

The overriding principle is that the punishment must fit the crime and it is likely that non fatal injuries were paid for monetarily, though direct physical punishment is not ruled out. In our modern world, anyone who vandalizes a car in Singapore receives a public caning (a whipping with a cane). There are still countries where these kinds of physical punishments are inflicted, but many countries stopped this kind of punishment in the 60's and 70's. The flogging of students with a strap is still legal in many areas of the world as is reasonable corporal punishment of one's own children.

One is forbidden to make the punishment exceed the crime and this passage wants to stop damage from escalating. I do not want to get into a discussion of the merits of capital punishment. Sufficient to say that the Canadian Police Association reported that when capital punishment ended in Canada, the murder rate increased over 600%. Some states still have capital punishment and it should not be looked at as a barbaric form of justice. Murder and rape are violent, barbaric crimes and their perpetrators should be treated accordingly without being deprived of the right of due process in a court of law.

The abuse of parents is forbidden and is punishable by death. Parents stayed with their children their whole lives and were never to be mistreated. Cursing does not refer to using foul language with your parents. It refers to calling down curses on them to injure them or cause them to lose their lives. Senior abuse was a capital crime.

All of the statutes outlined in this portion were applications of the Ten Sacred Words in order to bring about the rule of divine law in the lives of the people. We face the same task in today's world because the principles of G-d's divine justice never change or alter. Trying to exercise justice can be a complicated procedure, but it is one which those who claim to follow YHVH need to exercise to the best of their ability. Lawlessness is not a good option.

When it comes to sabbath observance, Jews were not allowed to hire Gentiles to do their work for them on the Sabbath. Everybody rested. The concept of a Shabbat goy is a violation of the Torah. The festival cycle was set up so that three times a year, the people could pay their agricultural tithes. Non agricultural tithes were likely also given at these celebrations. Tithing needs to always be a regular, joyful part of how we walk with YHVH.

Middle Eastern pagans had a horrible custom. They would boil a baby goat in its mother's milk. They wanted the sexual power of the mother goat and the life force of the newborn goat. The Torah does not forbid us from mixing meat and dairy, it just specifies that we cannot use food to get special, magical powers.

Related to this, the Jews were instructed not to imitate any aspect of the Canaanites pagan practices. Paganism uses rituals and magic ceremonies to obligate their gods to act in their favor. Believers in YHVH who want His favor have to walk according to His Word. We should never consider Him of celestial sugar daddy in the sky that we can point at our enemies.

Towards the end of the giving of these applications, YHVH tells the people that He will deliver the Canaanites into their hands gradually so that the land does not turn into a wilderness where wild beasts multiply. Sometimes we have to grow into the L-rd's blessings and for that we need patience. As our strength increases, so does our victory.

The passage ends with the elders eating a second ritual meal in the presence of YHVH and this time the elders see the feet of the L-RD, but not His face. Moses then climbs up the mountain and enters the cloud. The people have agreed to abide by the words they have heard and the have Aaron and the elders if they need to consult the YHVH on anything.

When the book of precepts is dedicated, the offerings were made by designated young men, since the Levites had not yet been designated as the priests. The people also had their leaders of ten, of fifty, of a hundred and of a thousand. There was no reason for paganism to rise up in rebellion against the Word or against the designated leaders. Sometimes the flesh ignores the Word and the works of the flesh take root. We should never let it happen in our lives. We do not want any golden calves to be built in our midst, ever.

Sermon: Second Winter Series: Never Lose Your Joy: Stay Sweet

Passage: *"Oh taste and see how good the L-RD is. Blessed is the man who seeks his refuge in Him"*(Ps. 34 :8[9]).

This morning, I want to examine how good the L-rd is and that we should never lose sight of this central truth about our King. When I came to faith as a young person, the joy of the L-RD was my strength. At every stage of a believer's life, this should always be a daily reality, because He is always good and will always watch over us and help to remain more than conquerors. That does not mean that we will not pass through trials and even heartbreak, but when we realize who He is and see what He does in our lives, we will be so amazed that every trial becomes a joy and every painful experience can be turned over to Him as we let Him fill us with joy.

Today's passage comes from the Psalm which David composed after he had to pretend to be crazy before the Philistine king, Abimelech and was chased out of his presence. It was one of the lowest points in David's life. He had gone from being a favorite of the King to a fugitive who Saul was determined to kill. When he ran out of places to hide in Israel, he finally took refuge with Israel's archenemy, the Philistines.

The Philistines were one of the first people in the ancient Middle East to maintain a standing army, even in peacetime and they could mount an attack against Israel without having to muster an army. The early victories which Saul had won over them merely returned lost territory to Israel and did no damage to the Philistines themselves.

David fled from Saul because he did not want to have to kill him, but Saul kept on making greater and greater efforts to find him, corner him and attempt to kill him.

His move into enemy territory was a last ditch effort to find a solution and not have to keep running from Saul. When Saul heard about David going over to the Philistines, he may have felt his enemy had finally disqualified himself from ever becoming king and quit trying to find him.

David did not want to serve the Philistines but he was honour bound to serve the king he was seeking refuge with. His pretending to be crazy meant that he was not kept by the king's side and even though he and his men became part of the king's bodyguard, they were not required to be on duty until they were called for. David was amazed at the solution and would have been very glad that he did not have to protect the king if he went to war against Israel.

He had gotten a reprieve and it took quite a while for the Philistine King to decide to go to war against Israel. This may have been partly because of the successes of Saul's army, but all of his borders had to be secured before he risked an armed conflict with a powerful neighbour. There were five Philistine kings and they all had to be in agreement before they went to war. They went to war as a group, which made them even more dangerous.

During his reprieve, David made war on the surviving Amalekites who lived south of the Philistines and in part of the land which Judah had yet to drive them out of. When the king asked David where he was raiding, he assumed that David was raiding Judah, while he was really attacking the Amalekites.

The Psalm is a joyful song of praise because once again G-d has come through and David is rejoicing in the goodness of the L-RD. No matter what we are going through, the L-rd is with us and will bless us and deliver us because He is one Friend we can always rely on.

In my short life, I have encountered trials and tribulations which at times have seemed endless and sometimes even hopeless, but the joy of the L-rd which entered my heart on March 30th, 1971 has never left me and it has never been overcome or drowned out by anything which I have encountered on my journey through this life.

We need to learn to stay sweet and never lose our joy because His provision has no shelf life and He will never leave us nor forsake us, even in the midst of this pandemic. When we feel surrounded or trapped, we just need eyes to see the deliverance of the L-RD. This is what David had learned to do in his tumultuous life and he stayed fresh and sweet as long as he kept his eyes on the L-rd.

Over the years, I have always been joyfully amazed at the new and creative ways the L-rd has kept me and provided for me, even in the midst of great adversity. I have suffered loss and have witnessed tragedy, but He has always provided a way of escape to make it bearable and to keep me joyful. We are heaven bound citizens of the coming kingdom, who are called to be guided by His Word and filled with His Spirit. After being beaten and thrown into prison, the apostle Paul surprised his fellow inmates and his guards by singing praises to the Messiah. All we suffer in our King builds up an increasing weight of glory, which our suffering is not even worthy to be compared to.

As long as we keep our eyes focused on YHVH and not on our current troubles, we will see and experience His wonderful deliverance, time and time again. This was the testimony and experience of David and should be ours, daily and constantly.

Sometimes we are going to feel discouraged and tired and that is not wrong, as long as we understand that through it all, the Messiah will always be with us and we keep our eyes peeled for His deliverance and His provision. There will be times for tears and even for heartbreak, especially when we are running from our enemies like David had to do.

There may even be times when our friends forsake us and our family turns on us. We may have to battle sickness and survive financial distress. David experienced all of this and never gave up because he was convinced that he was going to continue to see the goodness of the L-rd in the land of the living and he always did.

Once we understand that G-d will always come through for us, we can stay sweet and not lose our joy, even when the provision and the protection of the L-rd does not come through in ways we want or even expect.

I have been walking with the Messiah for 48 years and some of trials I have gone through were both vicious and heart breaking. I have been betrayed by believers and I have watched my friends and fellow believers suffer greatly and there was nothing I could do to help them. Some of my friends gave up and slipped back into the world and some became so bitter and angry that they considered G-d both a monster and a sadist. They were wrong, but at times I had no words to help them see things differently.

I have learned that I do not have to have all the answers and that at times my strength is going to run out and my heart is going to break into many pieces. David experienced the same kinds of things, but he never gave up on the G-d who never let him down, not even once.

You see the ways of G-d are not always understood by believers and He is working differently in the lives of different people. I do not wish troubles on any of you, but sometimes believers have witnessed unspeakable horrors and have even experienced them on a personal basis. I know someone whose mother and father were the only survivors of their extended families and they were put in death camps as the Nazis rolled across Eastern Europe.

I am not saying that we should be happy for all the pain and horror the enemy of our souls is scheming to try and destroy us with. We should rejoice with the firm conviction that he will never succeed because G-d's kingdom in our blessed Messiah is unstoppable and indestructible. When Davis stood before Abimelech, he was prepared to die at the hands of the man whose soldiers he had often slaughtered. He had reached the end of his rope and thought that his part of the story was about to come to a final, violent and abrupt end.

He had no guarantees but witnessed the deliverance of the L-rd because His purposes for him had not all been fulfilled. Said another way, we need to rejoice in the L-rd because we are unstoppable and indestructible until all of His purposes for our lives are fulfilled. I lost my best man to a tragic hospital error when he should have had several more decades of service ahead of him. I do not know why, but it was his time. I was not happy and almost broke down as I chanted kaddish over his open coffin, but then I knew that he would not be happy with such a silly display of grief in the face of everlasting life. I teared up, but I did not cry. My best buddy had gone home to be with the Messiah. I was angry and disappointed at the manner of his departure, but I was able to greatly rejoice at the wonder of his final destination. He made it home and was at rest and one day we will meet again.

The Psalms are interesting documents because they seem to go through a long and tortured process until they see things G-d's way and break forth into praise. They are not all joyful and some of them are pretty macabre (blessed is the one who snatches your babies and smashes their heads against a rock), but they all take the human experience and turn it into a song. They remain expressions of faith and confidence in the G-d who has everything under His final control. When the innocent are slaughtered and when evil people make victims of those who do not deserve to suffer and when millions of babies continue to be slaughtered in their mother's womb, we need to understand that this is only part of the picture.

As we prepare to go through the gates of glory into the everlasting kingdom, He will personally wipe away our tears and fill us to overflowing with eternal joy. Because this is the only end of the story that really matters and is the one believers are headed towards, bumps, pits and torture are nothing by comparison.

We need to stay sweet and never lose our joy because the one who found us stumbling around in the darkness of this darkening age is able to keep us, bless us, love us and let us taste and see how good He is. This is a hard lesson to learn and some will recoil in anger and horror because nobody has seen the trouble they've had. This kind of foolishness is a waste of our spiritual resources because we are heading towards the end of the story and one day soon all the pain and horror and suffering which has been inflicted on this weary world, will be over and the Day Star which is shining in our hearts will burst forth. All our darkness will be consumed and all the injustice of this evil world will be judged and believers can begin their eternal jog into the endless presence of our mighty G-d.

All the terrible things we have seen and have experienced and even some which we have been guilty of, will disappear forever in the light of His glory and grace. Sadness will turn to gladness and laughter will replace crying and the eternal joy of the L-rd will be our permanent dwelling place, far from the troubles of this sorry excuse for a world.

Sure, many will suffer spiritual loss because of the folly and the compromises they have made and even because of the carnal foolishness they gave into. But as long as there is a spark of the sweetness which came into our lives the moment we accepted the Messiah, none of this will make no never mind. I do not want to gnaw on the old bones which this disgusting world has thrown at me and I do not want to make horror and suffering my constant meditation. There is a time to remember what we have been through but we need to concentrate on the courage and the joy of the survivors, even as we remember the endless number of those we have lost. The end of the story is glorious, no matter how bad it is until we get there.

The enemy is deceitful and incredibly devious and he wants to disguise evil as good and portray good as evil and his relentless attacks on the righteous have only begun to kick into gear for his final assault. But beyond the flames of all he can throw at us, there is a golden city and a garden where the light never dims and where there is healing for all the nations and generations of mankind. Our final destiny is everlasting joy and not destruction.

We will no longer think on the old things, once we have been healed and have been heard and we will be too busy rejoicing with sweet, everlasting joy to spare a second for anything else. So, mishpocah, never lose your sweetness and do not let anything rob you of your joy. Shabbat Shalom and Shavua Tov.