

Torah Thoughts Mishpatim

5778:

The relationship between God and the Jewish people has been compared to that of lovers, each yearning for the other, and each feeling their own destiny as being entwined with that of the other. If the Exodus was the elopement between God and the Israelites, and Sinai was the wedding, this week's Torah portion gets down to the details of what married life for these two will be like. With the drama of the Exodus over, and the whirlwind of revelation subsided, the routine of daily life is about to assert itself.

Those details are what will turn daily life in the land of Canaan, once it is reached, conquered and settled, into the idealized society that God has in mind. It is like archaeology in reverse: Instead of uncovering the buried secrets of an unknown past and reconstituting them to understand a society that once was and is no more, the Torah reveals the myriad details of daily life as it will be lived in a future that has yet to be created.

Those details are as varied as they are numerous: Laws of slavery, capital cases, injury law, property damage, rules protecting the weak, defenseless and poor, sacrificial laws and food laws, among many others. Having established the broad outlines of what it means to be holy in *aseret hadibrot* (the Ten Commandments), the Torah now begins to fill in the minutiae of how exactly to do so.

This parshah, perhaps more than any other, reminds us that Judaism emphasizes action over dogma, deeds over belief. It is not the case that we can dispose of our beliefs, but rather that our faith in the marriage between God and us is so strong that we assume its existence and then move quickly to what that relationship means: Distinctive behaviors in all of life's realms. Just as a marriage between two people forever alters the way each partner approaches their daily tasks, so too the covenant between God and Israel assumes, and demands, a new approach in our lives as Jews.

Shabbat shalom