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Mishpatim/Exodus 21:1-24:18

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TORAH STUDY

Mount Sinai speaks for continuity

"And these are the laws that you will place before them." (Exodus 21:1) The opening word of the Torah portion Mishpatim is "and." It's strange to start a portion with a conjunction. What does it mean?

Our Rabbis teach us that each word of the Torah is laden with layers upon layers of meaning. What secret does the "and" reveal?

Mishpatim (laws) deals with civil laws concerning premeditated murder, involuntary manslaughter, kidnapping, torts and damages, theft, and robbery, among others. Many of these laws are not unique to laws found in Torah law; rather, they are commonly found in other legal systems.

The portion begins after the encounter at Mount Sinai, where God spoke to the entire Jewish people and revealed the Ten Commandments. These are not laws we would have legislated instinctively; we required a divine revelation of the path God wanted the Jewish people to follow.


The commentator Rashi is sensitive to our question of why the portion begins with "and." He explains the use of the conjunction by stating, "Just as those (Ten Commandments) are from Mount Sinai, so too are these (Mishpatim) from Mount Sinai." What does Rashi mean? Why is there a need to reiterate the divine source of civil law? How does this explain the use of the conjunction at the beginning of the portion?

The answer is "continuity."

Throughout history, humanity has developed systems of law, morals and values. Many of them are objectively true and just. However, the fact that these laws are true and just does not guarantee that society will follow them faithfully. In fact, some of the most advanced and acculturated societies have managed completely to debase themselves through barbaric and senseless behavior.

The Nazis are a prime example. Early 20th-century Berliners witnessed the height of every intellectual and cultural achievement in Western civilization. Every major discipline - medicine, philosophy, science and mathematics - reached its most prestigious form in Berlin. Even with these achievements, the Nazis were not deterred from degenerating into the most despicable murderers in recent history. Why did this happen?

Because they believed they dictated justice and determined truth. When a society believes that it has created a value system by itself, that society can suspend those rules at its discretion. There are no limitations to the depths that we can sink when we believe that only we determine the parameters of truth, justice and goodness.



However, when we recognize that we derive all truth and justice from the Torah - a reference to the commentary, "these and those were given at Mount Sinai" - then we cannot change this morality, and continuity with our past is maintained. The timeless truths of the Torah stand as a beacon of light, cutting through the darkness of history. Every time a culture of immorality and barbarism challenges us, the Torah strengthens us to maintain the mitzvot that we received at Mount Sinai.

This is the secret of Jewish survival.

We must strive to learn, understand and love Torah, in order to ensure the continuity of our people. In the absence of a clear recognition of the eternal nature of Torah, the fiber of our society becomes threadbare.

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Jewish News invites local rabbis to present commentaries on the weekly Torah portion.

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