



Mishpatim – One Ramp at a Time

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“And these are the ordinances that you shall set before them.” (Exodus 21:1)

Society is built on laws. Our legal system creates expectations, obligation and attempts to safeguard the individual from harm and society from decay. *Mishpatim* is filled with detailed laws regarding damages, fair treatment for servants, charity and looking out for the needs of the underprivileged. These laws serve to create an atmosphere of justice, fairness and compassion.

The Talmud (Sanhedrin 7b) notes an interesting juxtaposition between the first verse in this week’s Parsha (mentioned above) and the last verse in Parshas Yisro; *“And you shall not ascend with steps upon My altar, so that your nakedness shall not be exposed upon it (Exodus 20:23).”* The Talmud explains:

Bar Kavra asked: ‘From where do we know the concept of hevu misunim b’din (one must be deliberate in judgement)? The verse says, ‘you shall not ascend with steps,” and then afterwards it says, ‘These are the laws.’”

The Torah prohibits the use of stairs to ascend the altar – we must construct a ramp. A ramp represents incremental ascension, whereas as a step must be taken all at once. The Talmud explains that the juxtaposition of these verses teaches that just as the Kohen (priest) must ascend slowly to the top of the altar, so must the judge take his time in deciding and adjudicating the legal disputes before him. The judge must take the time to analyze, process and review all pertinent information before issuing a proper verdict. The placement of this important lesson comes at the end of Yisro, the parsha in which Moshe sets up the Jewish judicial system and the beginning of *Mishpatim* where Moshe gives us the body of tort and interpersonal law.

But there is another lesson to be learned, a lesson that applies to us all. Rav Chaim Shmulevitz zt”l (1902-1979) explains that the word *misunim* does not simply mean *deliberate*, it means *patience*. The Rabbis were not simply telling us to take our time in issuing judgement; they were telling us to learn the art of patience. Up until this point, whatever the people needed was provided immediately. They needed the sea to part – it split. They needed food – manna came down from the heavens. The desert was hot by day – there was constant cloud cover. The desert was cold at night – there was a fire to warm them. Whatever they needed – they were granted. **And it is now that God instructs Moshe to tell the Jewish people – life is a ramp.** You must take small steps to accomplish your goals. Your growth must be incremental. You won’t always see immediate results. You must work on creating a just society. You will not be able to solve all of the problems at once. There will be widows and orphans who you must help, yet you will never get to all of them. There will be the poor and hungry who you must clothe and feed, yet there will be those who remain destitute. At times you may feel frustrated and wonder if you are really accomplishing anything, you may wonder if you are really moving the needle on these dramatic life issues? And so, God tells us, you must be patient. You will accomplish, self-actualize, and grow – but it will all take time. I have provided you with instant gratification because in your embryonic national state – this is what you needed. But as you mature and develop – you will have to learn to wait. You will have to learn to be *misunim b’din* – patient, as you try to reach your goals.

We live in a world which craves instant gratification. We want it all and we want it now. And when we don’t get it – the process, the product or the person must be broken. Couples have challenges in their marriage and if the therapist can’t fix it immediately there is a temptation to throw in the towel. We take on certain responsibilities or embark on new life initiatives and if we can’t accomplish or cross the finish-line quickly we are ready to move on to other things. We work on finding inspiration in our Judaism and if we can’t feel it after one shiur, Drasha or lecture, we’re ready to move on. **God teaches us that patience is not a virtue, it is a necessity.** We must be patient and allow our efforts to bear fruit. We must be patient and find the strength to work through our challenges. If we learn to navigate the ramp of life, we will realize success as individuals and as a nation.