

International Rabbinic Fellowship

Weekly Dvar Torah

Parshat Mishpatim

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This week's Dvar Torah is provided by Rabbi David Wolkenfeld, Director OU-JLIC, Princeton University

“Six days you shall do your work, but on the seventh day - cease, so that your ox and donkey can rest, and the children of your maidservant, and the stranger can be refreshed.”

This iteration (Exodus 23:12) of the mitzvah of Shabbat observance, introduces a new dimension to Shabbat. In *Parashat Bereishit*, the Seventh Day is made holy by God's rest. In *Parashat Yitro*, as part of the *Asseret HaDibrot*, the entire Jewish people is commanded to observe Shabbat as a way of memorializing and commemorating God's creation and rest. There (Exodus 20:10), the Torah seems to directly command all our servants and animals to observe Shabbat together with us. Here, we Jews are commanded to observe Shabbat “*tishbot*” and on account of that Shabbat observance, our animals rest (*yannab*), and servants in our household find refreshment (*vayinafesh*).

This formulation, in which our Shabbat observance lets others rest, introduces a social element to Shabbat observance. Only a rigorous set of Shabbat restrictions, which emerges in our detailed and comprehensive *Hilkebot Shabbat*, ensures that the poorest and most socially and economically vulnerable can have a day of rest too. Seforno notes that the Torah's emphasis on the rest of the least powerful, is a potent reversal of the injustice perpetrated against us in Egypt where the denial of a day of rest was a particularly harsh aspect of slavery (c.f. Exodus 5:9). In contemporary terms, if Shabbat becomes just a “day off” or a day of leisure and recreation, then shopkeepers, waitresses, taxi and bus drivers, and other service providers, will be forced to work to cater to the needs of the wealthiest. It is our observance of Shabbat (*tishbot*), that creates a restorative and restful day for all.

Judith Sulevitz's 2010 book, “The Sabbath World: Glimpses of a Different Order of Time” is, in large part, an extended meditation on what America has lost, as Sunday blue laws and the distinct Sabbath experience, of both religious and secular Americans, has vanished, replaced by a 24/7 work week in which we are chained to our jobs by smart-phones and text messages. Puritan pilgrims came to America in the 17th century, looking to establish a more rigorous Sabbath atmosphere - knowing that only coordinating communal rest, could ensure the necessary refreshment for all individuals. Looking at contemporary America, Shulevitz writes:

True rest, it turns out, is a group activity, not a solitary one; a restful atmosphere is the distillate of a society at rest, not the creation of a single person. This is a lesson we learn, belatedly, from the American Sabbath, even as it vanishes. We rested best when others rested with us, keeping us company and giving us something fun to do as well as moral reinforcement against the fear we'll fall behind. We rest poorly when the world around us hums with activity. (“*The Meaning of the Sabbath*” L.A. Times, May 2, 2010).

The European political Left understands this, and has recognized that the greater liberty and options for economic growth inherent in the more robust Capitalism of contemporary America, comes at the cost of a universal day of rest, one that all sectors of society can take part in. In Israel, fixation on “religious coercion” has blinded many Israelis to the social context of Shabbat. If busses run and restaurants open on Shabbat, how can waitresses, traffic cops, bus drivers and mechanics have a day off from work when their children are also not in school?

And what of *Parashat Mishpatim*? This *parasha* introduces dozens of *mitzvot*. Like other mitzvah-rich sections of the Torah, there is a seamless web of civil law, ritual law, ethical exhortations, and statements about the nature of Jewish society. This verse in particular is a helpful reminder that the Torah is not (only) a guide for personal spiritual fulfillment, or (only) a source of moral and ethical wisdom, but is a blueprint for a society, albeit a special kind of society (*mamleket kohanim ve'goy kadosh*) and must therefore legislate, not only for individual spiritual and ethical achievement, but for nation as a whole and all of its elements.

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