

Kol Rina
An Independent Minyan
Prashat Mishpatim
February 10, 2024 *** 1 Adar, 5784

[Mishpatim in a Nutshell](https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/1298/jewish/Mishpatim-in-a-Nutshell.htm)

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The name of the Parshah, "Mishpatim," means "Ordinances" and it is found in Exodus 21:1.

Following the revelation at Sinai, G-d legislates a series of laws for the people of Israel. These include the laws of the indentured servant; the penalties for murder, kidnapping, assault and theft; civil laws pertaining to redress of damages, the granting of loans and the responsibilities of the "Four Guardians"; and the rules governing the conduct of justice by courts of law.

Also included are laws warning against mistreatment of foreigners; the observance of the seasonal festivals, and the agricultural gifts that are to be brought to the Holy Temple in Jerusalem; the prohibition against cooking meat with milk; and the mitzvah of prayer. Altogether, the Parshah of Mishpatim contains 53 mitzvot—23 imperative commandments and 30 prohibitions.

G-d promises to bring the people of Israel to the Holy Land, and warns them against assuming the pagan ways of its current inhabitants.

The people of Israel proclaim, "We will do and we will hear all that G-d commands us." Leaving Aaron and Hur in charge in the Israelite camp, Moses ascends Mount Sinai and remains there for forty days and forty nights to receive the Torah from G-d.

[Shabbat Rosh Chodesh Haftarah in a Nutshell: Isaiah 66: 1-24](https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/3572702/jewish/Shabbat-Rosh-Chodesh-Haftarah-in-a-Nutshell.htm)

https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/3572702/jewish/Shabbat-Rosh-Chodesh-Haftarah-in-a-Nutshell.htm

This haftarah, read whenever Shabbat coincides with Rosh Chodesh, mentions how in the messianic era, every Shabbat and every Rosh Chodesh everyone will come to the Temple to worship G-d.

In this prophecy Isaiah tells us how G-d (who is too great to be fully contained in physical space, even in the Temple) pays attention to the humble G-d-fearing person, and rejects a person who does (or even intends) evil.

The prophet continues to foretell the fortune that will come upon Jerusalem (and the Jewish nation) in the time to come, and how even non-Jews will come to

recognize G-d and assist in restoring the Jewish people to their land and their Temple.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

God's Nudge: Mishpatim by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks z"l

<https://rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/mishpatim/gods-nudge/>

First in Yitro there were the Aseret Hadibrot, the "Ten Utterances", the Ten Commandments, expressed as general principles. Now in Mishpatim come the details. Here is how they begin:

If you buy a Hebrew servant, he is to serve you for six years. But in the seventh year, he shall go free, without paying anything . . . But if the servant declares, 'I love my master and my wife and children and do not want to go free,' then his master must take him before the judges. He shall take him to the door or the doorpost and pierce his ear with an awl. Then he will be his servant for life. Ex. 21:2-6

There is an obvious question. Why begin here, with this law? There are 613 commandments. Why does Mishpatim – the first full law code in the Torah – begin where it does?

The answer is equally obvious. The Israelites have just endured slavery in Egypt. There must be a reason why this happened, for God knew it was going to happen. Evidently He intended it to happen. Centuries before, He had already told Abraham it would happen:

As the sun was setting, Abram fell into a deep sleep, and a thick and dreadful darkness came over him. Then the Lord said to him, "Know for certain that for four hundred years your descendants will be strangers in a country that is not their own, and that they will be enslaved and mistreated there. Gen. 15:12-13

It seems that this was the necessary first experience of the Israelites as a nation. From the very start of the human story, the God of freedom sought the free worship of free human beings. But one after the other, people abused that freedom: first Adam and Eve, then Cain, then the generation of the Flood, then the builders of Babel.

God began again, this time not with all humanity, but with one man, one woman, one family who would become pioneers of freedom. Still, freedom is difficult. We

each seek it for ourselves, but we deny it to others when their freedom conflicts with ours. So deeply is this true that within three generations of Abraham's children, Joseph's brothers were willing to sell him into slavery: a tragedy that did not end until Judah was prepared to forfeit his own freedom so that his brother Benjamin could go free.

It took the collective experience of the Israelites, their deep, intimate, personal, backbreaking, bitter experience of slavery – a memory they were commanded never to forget – to turn them into a people who would no longer turn their brothers and sisters into slaves, a people capable of constructing a free society, the hardest of all achievements in the human realm.

So it is no surprise that the first laws they were commanded after Sinai related to slavery. It would have been a surprise had they been about anything else. But now comes the real question. If God does not want slavery, if He regards it as an affront to the human condition, why did He not abolish it immediately? Why did He allow it to continue, albeit in a restricted and regulated way, as described in this week's parsha? Is it conceivable that God, who can produce water from a rock, manna from heaven, and turn sea into dry land, cannot call for this change to human behaviour? Are there areas where the All-Powerful is, so to speak, powerless?

In 2008 economist Richard Thaler and law professor Cass Sunstein published a fascinating book called *Nudge*.^[1] In it they addressed a fundamental problem in the logic of freedom. On the one hand freedom depends on not over-legislating. It means creating space within which people have the right to choose for themselves.

On the other hand, we know that people will not always make the right choices. The old model on which classical economics was based, that left to themselves people will make rational choices, turns out not to be true. We are deeply irrational, a discovery to which several Jewish academics made major contributions. The psychologists Solomon Asch and Stanley Milgram showed how much we are influenced by the desire to conform, even when we know that other people have got it wrong. The Israeli economists, Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky, showed how even when making economic decisions we frequently miscalculate their effects and fail to recognise our motivations, a finding for which Kahneman won the Nobel Prize.

How then do you stop people doing harmful things without taking away their freedom? Thaler and Sunstein's answer is that there are oblique ways in which you can influence people. In a cafeteria, for example, you can put healthy food at eye level and junk food in a more inaccessible and less noticeable place. You can

subtly adjust what they call people's "choice architecture."

That is exactly what God does in the case of slavery. He does not abolish it, but He so circumscribes it that He sets in motion a process that will foreseeably lead people to abandon it of their own accord, although it may take many centuries.

A Hebrew slave is to go free after six years. If the slave has grown so used to his condition that he wishes not to go free, then he is required to undergo a stigmatising ceremony, having his ear pierced, which thereafter remains as a visible sign of shame. Every Shabbat, slaves cannot be forced to work. All these stipulations have the effect of turning slavery from a lifelong fate into a temporary condition, and one that is perceived to be a humiliation rather than something written indelibly into the human script.

Why choose this way of doing things? Because people must freely choose to abolish slavery if they are to be free at all. It took the reign of terror after the French Revolution to show how wrong Rousseau was when he wrote in *The Social Contract* that, if necessary, people have to be forced to be free. That is a contradiction in terms, and it led, in the title of J. L. Talmon's great book on the thinking behind the French Revolution, to totalitarian democracy.

God can change nature, said Maimonides, but He cannot, or chooses not to, change human nature, precisely because Judaism is built on the principle of human freedom. So He could not abolish slavery overnight, but He could change our choice architecture, or in plain words, give us a nudge, signalling that slavery is wrong but that we must be the ones to abolish it, in our own time, through our own understanding. It took a very long time indeed, and in America, not without a civil war. But it happened.

There are some issues on which God gives us a nudge. The rest is up to us.

[1] Richard H. Thaler and Cass R Sunstein, *Nudge: Improving Decisions About Health, Wealth, and Happiness*, Penguin Books, 2008.

[How Can Humans Uphold Divine Justice? By Caleb Brommer](https://www.jtsa.edu/torah/how-can-humans-uphold-divine-justice/)

<https://www.jtsa.edu/torah/how-can-humans-uphold-divine-justice/>

The smoke hasn't yet cleared from the mountain. God's holy and un-behold-able Presence is still descended upon the peak, but we're not privy to it, thank God. We'd certainly die if we beheld the Presence up close or heard the Voice. God speaks to Moshe. He is our eyes, our ears, and our interpreter, thank God. We heard the first bit—the first ten. They were un-unhearable. But what now? Ten Commandments does not a society make.

In Parashat Mishpatim, the Ten Commandments are immediately followed by a more thoroughgoing account of the Israelite legal code. God, through Their

intermediary Moshe, reveals some of the particularly sticky, tricky, and challenging cases of civil law. Mishpatim begins to answer the questions “What happens when human beings are slammed together in community? What happens when they disagree, make mistakes, and cause incidental or intentional harm? What happens when they kill each other?”

The parashah addresses the whole gamut of communal regulations: slave law, death penalty, murder and manslaughter, civil family law, and a detailed spectrum of damages and restitution. It is here we receive the following (in)famous injunction towards equality before the law:

And if there is harm done, you should give life for life. Eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot. (Exod. 21:23–24)

It’s one of the most recognizable lines in the whole Tanakh, and it’s a compelling section for a number of reasons: Is it meant to be taken literally? Does this principle lead to interminable cycles of revenge? Are these laws to be applied uniformly to kings and courtiers, rich and poor? Prof. Nehama Leibowitz remarks that in roughly contemporaneous Babylonian legal codes, a system of damages and restitution existed that allowed the wealthy to buy their way out of punishment for harm done. Thus, argues contemporary translator and commentator Everett Fox in his footnote on these verses, the Toraitic legal code was meant to set Israel apart: “In Israel this could not be done, and thus we are dealing not with ‘strict justice’ but with strict fairness.” In other words, while financial compensation for injury may represent a just outcome to an unfortunate situation, the fact that not everyone would be able to afford financial restitution means that, to keep things fair, everyone must be held to the standard of physical restitution in the form of mirrored injury.

There is something morbidly compelling about this read, that the wealthy and powerful are held to account the same way anyone else would be. But beyond the politics of socio-economic status, I think this passage gets at a deeply human instinct: when someone hurts us, we want to hurt them in just the same way. On its face, the Torah seems to be giving us permission to act on this instinct.

But is that the justice that God wants? Saadiah Gaon (882–942 CE) recognized a difficulty, and the commentator Ibn Ezra (1089–1167) paraphrases him well:

Rabbi Saadiah says that we cannot interpret this verse according to its simple meaning. For if a person struck their fellow’s eye and destroyed one third of their vision, how could such a blow be struck [retaliated upon the offender] that is no more and no less? Perhaps their [the original culprit’s] vision will be more destroyed! (Ibn Ezra on Exodus 21:24, עין ח"ד)

Rav Saadiah Gaon is arguing something critical here: there is a transcendent equality that God may command us to get as close to as possible. But there are moments where we simply cannot inflict and uphold divine justice as human beings. We cannot be sure that our retaliation will not represent a problematic escalation of damage or violence, so we must be creative in finding another method of restitution. Saadiah's conclusion reflects those reached by the vast majority of interpreters from the rabbinic period to today:

It would be appropriate to [literally] give an eye for an eye if they do not pay [money] for it. (ibid)

Saadiah has returned us to the question of financial restitution for injury, but he does not see it as the privilege of the wealthy. Rather, because it is untenable to sustain a society where justice is achieved through mutual mutilation, everyone is held to the standard of financial compensation for injury. Thus, Saadiah reads the Torah as advocating against perpetual punishment; the Torah is an etz hayim, a tree of life, and cannot possibly expect literal, bodily restitution for harm done. The possibility of continued violence is no solution. Instead, restitution must be made by other means: monetary reparations, mediation, diplomacy.

This diplomacy is on full display later in the parashah where we read:

When you encounter your enemy's ox, or their donkey wandering astray, you must return it to them. If you see the donkey of one who hates you lying down under its burden, reject [the inclination] to abandon it to them, but help them unburden it. (Exod. 23:4–5)

Parashat Mishpatim recognizes that the hustle and bustle of humanity can lead to disagreement, challenge, anger, and violence. But I believe the place it's trying to get us to, the world it is trying to envision, is a just one: a world where people on all levels of society are held to account for their misdeeds, but not in a way that sustains violence. Parashat Mishpatim accepts that ours is a world where enemies, violence, and bloodshed exist. But the text also depicts a civilization where we recognize a human kinship with our enemies, where we remain in community with those who hate us, and where we seek to end cycles of violence through reparations, humility, and diplomacy. In so doing, we get as close as we can to divine justice. (*Caleb Brommer, is a student at the Rabbinical School of JTS, Class of 2024*)

[Parashat Mishpatim: Ownership and Social Responsibility: Humans as Co-creators and Co-owners by Rabbi Norman Lamm z"l Edited by Grow Torah](https://www.growtorah.org/shemot/2022/01/25-parshat-mishpatim-ownership-and-social-responsibility-humans-as-co-creators-and-co-owners)

<https://www.growtorah.org/shemot/2022/01/25-parshat-mishpatim-ownership-and-social-responsibility-humans-as-co-creators-and-co-owners-2t3jc>

In this week's Torah portion of Mishpatim, Hashem commands the Jewish people concerning the laws of borrowing and guarding property.[1] The relations between Hashem, people, and nature may be clarified by referring to the halakhah (Jewish law) concerning the relationships between owner, material, and artisan. The Mishnah discusses the case of a man (owner) who gave some material to an artisan to fashion it. The artisan, instead of repairing, spoiled the object. The law is that the artisan must pay the amount of the damages to the owner.

The question then arises in the Babylonian Talmud: What is this object, which the owner gave over to the artisan, and the damages for which the latter must compensate the owner?[2] Clearly, if it was a finished vessel, and the artisan broke it, the latter must pay the difference in value. But if the owner gave raw material to the worker, asking that he fashion it into a complete vessel, and the artisan did so, but then broke the very vessel he made, is the artisan obligated, in such a case, to compensate the owner for the difference in value between a perfect vessel and a broken one, or is he free of obligation since the broken vessel is no less in value than the raw material with which he began?

[Who Owns "Improved" Material? The Debate Raged On](#)

The question was in controversy amongst both Tannaim (early rabbinic sages) and Amora'im (later rabbinic sages) [i.e., for more than half a millennium, from the first century before the Common Era through the composition of the Babylonian and Jerusalem Talmuds]. Some held that "uman koneh b'shevah kelim." that the artisan has a monetary right in the vessel by virtue of the improvement he effected in transforming it from, for instance, mere planks into a table. If the table belongs, then, to the artisan, he cannot be held responsible to pay the owner of the planks for damages to that table if he should later break it.

Others disagree: the improvement in the material is the property of the original owner, and if the artisan later destroyed the completed object, he injured the owner and must compensate him for the cost of the completed object. Most authorities decide the law in favor of the latter opinion: it is the original owner of the raw material who has proprietary rights in the completed artifact, not the artisan who invested his fabricative talents. The explanation for the artisan's legal responsibility for the finished product is contained in a Tannaitic [i.e. early, from the time of the teachers cited in the Mishnah] source: The artisan is to be considered a shomer sakhar, or paid trustee, for the article he fashioned and which belongs to the original owner, and as such he must pay for the object if he damaged it.[3]

What we learn from this, then, is that the artisan is paid by the owner for two functions: for improving the material by fashioning a vessel out of it and for

watching over and protecting that vessel once it is completed. This artifact which he created with his own hands, over which he labored with the sweat of his brow, into which he put his remarkable talents, this vessel must now be guarded by him for the owner from any damage it sustains in the course of his trusteeship over it. This is so, the halakhah decides, because the artisan has no proprietary right in the article he created. It simply does not belong to him.

Vis-à-vis Nature, Humans Are Trustees

That people's role as co-creator with Hashem must not be exaggerated; we learn from the following Talmudic passage, "The Rabbis taught: man was created on the eve of the Sabbath. Why? So that the Sadducees (i.e., heretics) should not say that Hashem had a partner in the act of creation of the world." [4] This statement does not contradict that of Rabbi Akiva, who declared people's actions more beautiful, or suitable, than those of Hashem, hence emphasizing the religious sanction of people's creative office. Humanity remains a partner of Hashem in the ongoing creative process.

However, here we must distinguish between two Hebrew synonyms for creation: *beri'ah* and *yetzirah*. The former refers to "creatio ex nihilo" (creation out of nothing) and hence can only be said of Hashem. The latter describes creation out of some preexistent substance, and hence may be said both of Hashem (after the initial act of *Bereishit*) and of people. Hashem has no "partners" in the one-time act of *beri'ah* with which He called the universe into being, and the world is, in an ultimate sense, exclusively His. He does invite people to join Him, as a co-creator, in the ongoing process of *yetzirah*. Hence, humanity receives from Hashem the commission to "subdue" nature by means of the human *yetzirah*-functions; but, because people are incapable of *beri'ah*, they remain responsible to the Creator for how they have disposed of the world.

Let us now project the above case of owners and guardians onto the cosmic scene. Hashem is the Owner, people the artisan, and the raw material is all the wealth of this world: nature, life, culture, society, intellect, family. Humanity was charged with applying to them the human *yetzirah*-creative talents. People were commissioned to improve the world, build it up, transform it, "subdue" it. If they do so, they are "paid" for their labor. But people never have title over their own creations; they have no mastery over the world. Despite their investment of labor and talent, the world, even as perfected by them, belongs to the original Owner.

Thus the widespread degradation of the natural world represents a problem theologically as well as ecologically. Widespread deforestation, air and water pollution, global climate change—all of these place in jeopardy not only the quality of life, but the very survival of many or all species.

People, the yetzirah-creator, according to the teaching of halakhic Judaism, are responsible to Hashem, the beri'ah-Creator, not only for the raw material of the natural world into which they were placed but also for protecting and enhancing the civilization which they themselves created.

No matter how extensive and ingenious humanity's scientific and technological achievements in the transformation, conquest, and improvement of nature, people cannot displace the rightful Owner who provided the material in the first place. And not only do people not have proprietorship over raw nature, but they also are not even the absolute master of their own creations, the results of their magnificent yetzirah. They may not undo what they themselves did, for once having done it, it belongs to the Owner and not to the artisan. People must never entertain the notion that because they labored over their own creations, they have the right to destroy them, to repeal their creativity. They remain a paid trustee over their very own products and must guard them and watch over them with the greatest care. [1] Shemot 22:6-14 [2] Bava Kama 98b [3] Tosefta Bava Kama, ch. 2 [4] Babylonian Talmud Sanhedrin 38a

[Mishpatim: Mother's Milk – Why Wait Before Eating Meat? By the Accidental Talmudist](https://www.accidentaltalmudist.org/torah/2024/02/06/mishpatim-no-cheeseburgers-2/)
<https://www.accidentaltalmudist.org/torah/2024/02/06/mishpatim-no-cheeseburgers-2/>

Torah portion, Yitro, featured the most glorious moment in human history: God giving the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai. The next Torah portion, Mishpatim, brings us back down to earth with a long series of laws, many of them seemingly mundane. It might feel anticlimactic, but the Torah's message is that Judaism fills and sanctifies all areas of our lives, whether we're praying in synagogue and dressed in our Shabbat best, or calculating damages because our ox gored someone else's ox.

One of the ordinances in Mishpatim is the source of many of the laws of kashrut (kosher): "You shall not boil a kid its mother's milk." From this the rabbis deduce that we mustn't consume milk and meat together, neither in the same dish nor as part of the same meal. According to Jewish law, we wait six hours after eating meat before we can eat dairy. However, after eating dairy we don't need to wait nearly as long before eating meat. Why isn't the wait time the same whether you eat milk or meat first? One explanation is that meat dissolves more slowly between the teeth.

To understand the time discrepancy on a deeper level, let's first explore why we don't eat milk and meat together in the first place. Ibn Ezra (Spain, 1089-1167) says, "Eating the mother's life-giving milk, with meat, the dead flesh of the offspring, displays callousness, Judaism requires our sensitivity to extend to our

eating habits.” Boiling a kid in its own mother’s milk was a delicacy in the ancient world, but there’s a cruelty to the practice that is not in accordance with Judaism’s respect for all life. Milk represents life and meat represents death, and mixing life and death leads to moral confusion, which is antithetical to Torah Judaism.

Regarding the question of why we can eat dairy shortly before meat but not the other way around: milk represents not just life but kindness. A mother feeding her baby does so out of love. Slaughtering an animal is done to fulfill the physical need to eat – and there’s nothing wrong with eating meat, according to Jewish teachings. But acts of kindness should always come first. That’s why we are commanded to feed our animals before we feed ourselves (derived from Deut. 11:15). Kindness to others is more important than satisfying our own physical needs.

[Mishpatim: Words are Swords – Judge Fairly](#)

[Edited by Salvador Litvak, the Accidental Talmudist](#)

<https://www.accidentaltalmudist.org/table-for-five/2024/02/06/mishpatim-words-are-swords/>

Table for Five

Distance yourself from a false word; do not execute the innocent or the righteous, for I shall not exonerate the wicked. — Ex 23:7

[Rabbi Shlomo Seidenfeld, Freelance Rabbi, Scholar In-Residence Aish/JMI](#)

Words are like swords! They can assassinate a person’s character, shatter a child’s confidence or stigmatize an entire nation, race, religion etc. They can embolden feeble minds and they can be weaponized to justify the most egregious behavior. History, especially Jewish history, is replete with virulent rants and nefarious conspiracy theories that fomented the disenchanting masses into armies of hate and violence.

At a time when false narratives and hateful agendas are bubbling to the surface, the destructive power of speech is on full display.

It’s fascinating that the creation of the world happened thru speech. “Let there be light”, etc. The question is, why did G-d, as it were, speak the world into existence? Could he not have simply willed it into existence? What message was G-d imparting to humanity through this creation model?

Perhaps G-d was teaching that speech creates reality. That the spoken word can manipulate peoples’ minds and perpetuate primitive perceptions so that regular people could contemplate “the execution of the innocent or the righteous”! The Holocaust stands as an eternal and compelling monument to this potential reality.

But my friends, if words can animate false narratives and unleash violence they can also be exquisite vehicles for awareness, sensitivity and solidarity. Emphatic, unapologetic speech that is also constructive and respectful may not always change a person's mind but maybe, just maybe, it can open a person's mind. The world that our words create is in our hands, or better said, in our mouths. Am Yisroel Chai!

[Aliza Lipkin, Writer and educator, Maaleh Adumim, Israel](#)

Fake news is one of the biggest problems facing society today. It has become increasingly common for false information to spread like wildfire. Nowadays, misinformation and blatant lies go unchallenged, gain acceptance, and cause a chain of unfortunate events to unfold. Little white lies pave the way to more egregious untruths that quickly decay the foundation on which our society stands. It is for this very reason that immediately following the Torah's warning to distance oneself from lies, the Torah states do not kill a truly innocent person.

One need only watch "Judgement at Nuremberg" to understand how false words can lead to the death of not just one righteous man but to the genocide of millions of people.

It is frightening to witness the devastating power blatant lies can unleash. The bitter irony that South Africa can accuse Israel of perpetrating a supposed genocide while she is defending her people from an actual documented genocidal regime whose slogan calls for genocide is absurd! A verdict condemning Israel would be the tragic cause of countless more needless deaths.

The future of the world only stands a chance if the conscience of the court will abide by the laws of truth and acquit Israel of these false charges. If not, may God quickly fulfil His promise that "He will not vindicate an evil person." This statement is an eternal warning from God to the judicial system and all involved that they will indeed be held accountable for their deceitful verdict.

[Rabbi Chaim Singer-Frankes, Multifaith Chaplain & Spiritual Care Guide, Kaiser Panorama City](#)

Did you ever wonder why Torah bluntly mandates us to do one thing, where in other places we are cautioned to avoid another? There is one straightforward conclusion; because it is basic human nature to do the opposite of what is right and good. Alas, this is our tendency. And what are the consequences of taking the wrong course? Torah is the needle on our compass, pointing sincerely to the best path.

Our verse conveys a maxim regarding the colossal power of words. A three-letter root comprising the Hebrew letters dalet, vet and reish, denotes seeming

opposites. These three letters can be understood to mean "word" or "speech." They can also spell "thing" "matter" or "occurrence." Within our verse is the kernel of an immense truth; that words, apparently ephemeral and impermanent, really manifest as substantial entities. Herein, Torah implores us to see that words can be real, hard, and supremely consequential. Is a word uttered and forgotten? We hope so. As a schoolkid tormented by bullies, my mother lovingly toiled to console me, "don't pay attention, they're just words." Just as words can inspire, they also hurt like bricks and a lie has real impact, a matter of power and leverage. We dismiss the consequence and gravity of words at our peril for they both determine the fate of the innocent and reveal the intent of the selfish. In Proverbs 18:21, Ha'Melekh Shlomo goads us with a supreme measure of wisdom, "death and life are in the power of the tongue."

[Rabbi Natan Halevy, www.kahaljoseph.org](http://www.kahaljoseph.org)

A beautiful aspect of Torah is how one verse can be interpreted countless ways and has relevance to many different situations. This is especially true regarding our verse. On a simple level, it illustrates how much Judaism values life.

The Talmud states, "There is no truth in this world," implying that it is hard to always tell the truth in life. We must do our best to distance ourselves from lies. "Distance from a false word" implies distancing oneself from those who speak lies and gossip. This behavior may cause "false rumors," which can lead to symbolic execution of someone's reputation. In extreme cases this may lead to death of the "innocent and righteous."

Our verse warns judges to not create destruction (moral, financial, etc) through incorrect judgments. Such judges cause spiritual destruction, since our realm influences the unseen higher realms. A judge must stay clear of anything which could create the impression that he has dealings with something corrupt. A judge must be careful with their statements so that a liar cannot exploit their words for his own nefarious purposes.

The Torah acknowledges instances where we cannot convict the guilty.

We are assured that if a guilty person escapes human justice, he will not escape divine justice. Hashem will see to it that the wicked will not wind up being considered as "righteous." Distance from lies is also a warning to be vigilant against heresy, and things that distance us from Hashem.

[Rabbi Rebecca Schatz, Associate Rabbi, Temple Beth Am](#)

This verse starts off with a curious subject. Is it "midvar-sheker" meaning the words of a lie (dibur) or, from the object (davar) of the lie, that we should distance ourselves? The first supposes that Torah encourages us to distance ourselves from

untrue words, as if the words themselves become toxic. The second tells us to avoid untruthful materiality. However, Sferno reads this as our responsibility, not the lie or the liar's. As the judge needing to be careful with their own words so they would not be twisted or misused in a dishonest way.

We live in a world where misinformation is everywhere: news outlets, social media, voices of power in the government, and entertainment that we hear, watch or read. How can we be sure what is honest and therefore distance ourselves from the rest? Building trust. We must seek out nobler relationships, trustworthy sources, and honest behavior.

To convince another of our perception of truth feels like watching a movie and knowing the plot, but the characters don't yet know what's coming. And instead of trying to fix the unknown, we distance ourselves and let their story unravel. We distance ourselves, not for lack of care, but for protection of self and relationship with others and ultimately with truth. One day, through rebuilt trust, maybe we will engage in shared honest narrative and they will distance themselves from the toxicity. But until then, may we all have the courage to distance ourselves from lies and hold truth as a powerful value.

Shabbat Shalom

