

Kol Rina
An Independent Minyan
Parashat Mishpatim/Shabbat Shekalim
February 14, 2026 *** 27 Shevat, 5786

Mishpatim in a Nutshell

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

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 Shekalim in a Nutshell](https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/111736/jewish/Shekalim-in-a-Nutshell.htm)

https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/111736/jewish/Shekalim-in-a-Nutshell.htm

This week's Torah reading also includes Parshat Shekalim (Exodus 30:11–16), which speaks of the half-shekel each Jew contributed to the Sanctuary.

[Shekalim Haftarah in a Nutshell: II Kings 11:17 – 12:17](https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/640159/jewish/Haftarah-in-a-Nutshell.htm)

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The Parshat Shekalim Torah reading discusses the annual obligation for every Jew to give half a shekel to the Temple coffers. The haftarah discusses the efforts of King Jehoash (9th century BCE) to earmark these communal funds for the upkeep of the first Holy Temple.

Background for this haftarah: Because of an alliance with the Northern Kingdom of Israel, idol worship had become rampant in the erstwhile righteous Davidic dynasty-controlled Southern Kingdom. When the king of the Southern Kingdom, Ahaziah, was killed, his mother Athaliah murdered the remainder of the royal family and seized the throne. During her brief reign, she actively promoted idolatry. Unbeknownst to her, one of Ahaziah's sons, a small baby, was hidden and survived. When he became seven years of age, Jehoiada the High Priest led a successful revolt against Athaliah, and installed the child king, Jehoash, as the new King of Judea.

The haftarah begins with the new king renewing the people's

covenant with G-d. They destroyed all the pagan altars and statues and appointed officers to oversee the Holy Temple. Jehoash then instructed the priests regarding all the funds that were donated to the Temple. According to his plan, all the funds would be appropriated by the priests. In return, the priests would pay for the regular maintenance of the Temple. In the 23rd year of Jehoash's reign, the priests neglected to properly maintain the Temple. Jehoash then ordered that all monies should be placed in a special box that was placed near the Temple altar, and these funds were given directly to the workers and craftsmen who maintained the Temple.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

[In the Details – Mishpatim by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks z”l 5767
https://rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/mishpatim/in-the-details/](https://rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/mishpatim/in-the-details/)

On the opening phrase of Mishpatim: “And these are the laws you are to set before them,” (Shemot 21:1) Rashi comments:

“And these are the laws that you shall set before them.”

Wherever the word “these” is used, it signals a discontinuity with what has been stated previously. However, where the term “and these” is used, it signals a continuity. Just as the former commands were given at Sinai, so these were given at Sinai. Why then are the civil laws placed in juxtaposition to the laws concerning the altar? To tell you to place the Sanhedrin near to the Temple.

“...that you shall set before them.”

You should not think, 'I will teach them a section, or law, two or three times until they know the words verbatim, but I will not take the trouble to make them understand the reason and its significance.' Therefore the Torah states "that you shall set before them" like a fully laid table with everything ready for eating. Rashi on Shemot 21:1

Three remarkable propositions are being set out here which have shaped the contours of Judaism ever since.

The first is that just as the general principles of Judaism (Asseret HaDibrot means not "Ten Commandments" but "Ten Utterances" or "Ten Overarching Principles") are Divine, so are the details. In the 1960s the Danish architect Arne Jacobson designed a new college campus in Oxford. Not content with designing the building, he went on to design the cutlery and crockery to be used in the dining hall, and supervised the planting of every shrub in the college garden. When asked why, he replied in the words of another architect, Mies van der Rohe: 'God is in the details.'

That is a Jewish sentiment. There are those who believe that what is holy in Judaism is its broad vision, never so compellingly expressed as in the Decalogue at Sinai. The truth however is that God is in the details: "Just as the former were given at Sinai, so these were given at Sinai." The greatness of Judaism is not simply in its noble vision of a free, just, and compassionate society, but in the way it brings this vision down to earth in detailed legislation. Freedom is more than an abstract idea. It means (in an age in which slavery was taken for granted – it was not abolished in Britain or the United States until the nineteenth century) letting a slave go free after seven years, or immediately if his master has injured him. It

means granting slaves complete rest and freedom one day in seven. These laws do not abolish slavery, but they do create the conditions under which people will eventually learn to abolish it. No less importantly, they turn slavery from an existential fate to a temporary condition. Slavery is not what you are or how you were born, but something that has happened to you for a while, and from which you will one day be liberated. That is what these laws – especially the law of Shabbat – achieve, not in theory only, but in living practice. In this, as in virtually every other aspect of Judaism, God is in the details.

The second principle, no less fundamental, is that civil law is not secular law. We do not believe in the idea “render to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what belongs to God”. We believe in the separation of powers but not in the secularisation of law or the spiritualisation of faith. The Sanhedrin or Supreme Court must be placed near the Temple to teach that law itself must be driven by a religious vision. The greatest of these visions, stated in this week’s sedra, is:

“Do not oppress a stranger. You know what it is to be a stranger, for you yourselves were strangers in Egypt.”
Shemot 23:9

The Jewish vision of justice, given its detailed articulation here for the first time, is based not on expediency or pragmatism, nor even on abstract philosophical principles, but on the concrete historical memories of the Jewish people as “[one nation under God](#).” Centuries earlier, God has chosen Abraham so that he would “[teach his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord, by doing what is right and just](#).” (Bereishit 18:19) Justice in Judaism flows from the experience of injustice at the hands of the

Egyptians, and the God-given challenge to create a radically different form of society in Israel.

This is already foreshadowed in the first chapter of the Torah with its statement of the equal and absolute dignity of the human person as the image of God. That is why society must be based on the rule of law, impartially administered, treating all alike – “Do not follow the crowd in doing wrong. When you give testimony in a lawsuit, do not pervert justice by siding with the crowd, and do not show favouritism to a poor man in his lawsuit.” (Shemot 23:2-3)

To be sure, at the highest levels of mysticism, God is to be found in the innermost depths of the human soul, but God is equally to be found in the public square and in the structures of society: the marketplace, the corridors of power, and courts of law. There must be no gap, no dissociation of sensibilities, between the court of justice (the meeting-place of man and man) and the Temple (the meeting-place of man and God).

The third principle - and the most remarkable of all - is the idea that law does not belong to lawyers. It is the heritage of every Jew. Rashi wrote “Do not think, I will teach them a section or law two or three times until they know the words verbatim, but I will not take the trouble to make them understand the reason and significance of the law. The Torah states ‘that you shall set before them’ like a fully laid table with everything ready for eating.” This is the origin of the name of the most famous of all Jewish codes of law, Rabbi Joseph Karo’s Shulchan Aruch.

From earliest times, Judaism expected everyone to know and understand the law. Legal knowledge is not the closely guarded property of an elite. It is – in the famous phrase – “the heritage of the congregation of Jacob.” (Devarim 33:4) Already

in the first century CE Josephus could write that “should any one of our nation be asked about our laws, he will repeat them as readily as his own name. The result of our thorough education in our laws from the very dawn of intelligence is that they are, as it were, engraved on our souls. Hence to break them is rare, and no one can evade punishment by the excuse of ignorance.”[1] That is why there are so many Jewish lawyers. Judaism is a religion of law – not because it does not believe in love (“You shall love the Lord your God”, “You shall love your neighbour as yourself”) but because, without justice, neither love nor liberty nor human life itself can flourish. Love alone does not free a slave from his or her chains.

The sedra of Mishpatim, with its detailed rules and regulations, can sometimes seem a let-down after the breathtaking grandeur of the revelation at Sinai. It should not be. Yitro contains the vision, but God is in the details. Without the vision, law is blind. But without the details, the vision floats in heaven. With them the Divine Presence is brought down to earth, where we need it most. [1] Contra Apionem, ii, 177-8

[Mishpatim: Legal Is Not Always Just by Rabbi Max Antman](https://truah.org/resources/max-antman-mishpatim-moraltorah_2026/)
[https://truah.org/resources/max-antman-mishpatim-](https://truah.org/resources/max-antman-mishpatim-moraltorah_2026/)
[moraltorah_2026_ /](https://truah.org/resources/max-antman-mishpatim-moraltorah_2026/)

The word for legal justice in Hebrew is mishpat, the root of which means to decree or judge. And so, it is no surprise that in Parshat Mishpatim, narrative gives way to a compendium of 53 civil and criminal laws dictated to Moses at Sinai. These laws, which examine subjects including slave ownership, personal injury and liability, and property and theft, are the mechanism by which the Israelites are meant to build a functioning society, the continuation of the Ten

Commandments which they received on Mount Sinai. And at the end of this list of laws the Israelites respond to Moses with a well-known phrase: “We will do and hear [na’aseh ve-nishma] everything Adonai has said.” (Exodus 24:7) This verse is peculiar as it lists doing before hearing, a seemingly backwards motion, and the rabbis discuss at length why the Torah might phrase the Israelites’ response in this way.

One of the most interesting rabbinic conclusions comes from the 15th century Spanish rabbi Isaac ben Moses Arama, who notes that the word nishma, commonly translated as “we will hear,” can also mean “we will understand,” changing the verse to: “We will do and understand everything Adonai has said.” This interpretation seems to imply that for the Israelites to truly understand the moral and ethical implications of God’s commandments, they must first experience them.

American psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg famously taught that moral development, the ability to distinguish right from wrong, occurs in six distinct stages, with the final three being the most significant. The fourth stage of moral development is maintaining the social order, in which laws and regulations, not unlike those in Parshat Mishpatim, are followed and obeyed without question. The fifth stage focuses on individual rights, challenging every human being to consider what makes for a good and just society. And the final stage is that of universal ethics, in which moral reasoning is based on personal values. This stage acknowledges that elected processes do not always result in just outcomes, and that universal ethics, such as equity, justice, dignity, and respect, must form the bedrock of what is right and what is just. Laws and rules are only effective if they uphold these principles, and that can only be determined at this final stage, after those rules have been experienced.

Kohlberg understands that to achieve a society built upon universal ethics, we first have to experience a society of law. In other words, to fully understand, we must first do. But he also recognizes that after experiencing and understanding the laws present within our society, we may find that they do not represent the values we claim to hold. That in fact they protect the powerful at the expense of the vulnerable, vilify the abused while shielding the abuser, silence the oppressed while awarding the oppressor, divide rather than unite. And in that case, those laws require revision.

But in a time when the killing of unarmed Americans by federal law enforcement is administratively justified, in a country that prioritizes expansionism over international law, in a society that too often prioritizes profit over human dignity, law and justice have become anything but synonymous.

We must ask ourselves whether the laws of our nation truly embody the universal principles of equity, justice, dignity, and respect, and help us to build a society worthy of the people who live here. And if they do not, then our task is not blind obedience but moral courage.

Torah does not ask us to confuse legality with righteousness. It challenges us to investigate whether our laws serve the most vulnerable, honor human dignity, and reflect the divine spark that exists within every human being. When law and justice drift apart, our obligation is to work to bring them back into alignment, so that our world might embody what we know to be right. *(Rabbi Max G. Antman (he/him) is on the rabbinic team at Temple Shalom of Chicago, where he works to bring Torah, justice, and spirituality to students of all ages.)*

[Before Them, Before Us: Law as Master, Law as Servant](#)

by Gordon Tucker

<https://www.jtsa.edu/torah/before-them-before-us/>

These are the rules that you shall place before them.
(Exodus 21:1)

So begins this week's parashah, Mishpatim. It is here that the Jewish legal tradition begins, where Torah (i.e. "Instruction") becomes Nomos or Law.

Immediately after that opening sentence, the text continues with rules concerning masters and servants. This commentary will be applying the theme of masters and servants to that of our relationship to law in the Jewish tradition, in ways that open alternative understandings of that relationship.

There is certainly good reason to take pride in our legal tradition. It helped to crystallize a society, and later kept it together when sovereignty and a national center were lost. And one of the reasons it was able to do that was that it contains so many ennobling, uplifting exhortations and practices:

Be kind and extending to the person who is in need and borrows from you to subsist (22:24–26). Don't even think of oppressing an orphan or a widow, for the merciful God will in turn call you to account for not being merciful (22:21–23). Do not automatically follow a majority bent on evil, just because they are the majority (23:2). Create moments that transcend mundane living and remind you of your spiritual core—Shabbat and pilgrim festivals, accompanied by various sacrifices of time and fortune (23:12–19).

These are rules and practices of which we could say, to borrow a line from our American culture, that they lead us to

the formation of a more perfect union, a better society, a more compassionate and humane community.

But Parashat Mishpatim contains other elements as well:

About a father selling his daughter into servitude, and into marriage as a child to someone she cannot refuse to be married to (21:7–11). About slaves from outside the Israelite community who could be beaten because they are described in our Torah as “the master’s property” (21:20–21). About the uprooting and destruction not only of idolatry but of the idolaters themselves (22:23–24). And about the execution of witches (22:17).

What are we to do with these less than ennobling and uplifting laws that live side by side with the sublime blueprint for a better, more humane society? It is an age-old question. Its answer will depend entirely on the view that we adopt about the true nature of what is written in our sacred scroll, and why that scroll, and others, are so sacred to us.

The great Hasidic preacher Simhah Bunim of Przysucha understood the opening line cited above (“that you shall place before them”) to mean that the laws precede us, i.e., they take precedence over us. In his view, they have a meaning and a validity that is independent of the moral assessments that we may be driven to make of them. We must recognize that and subjugate ourselves to them, for there is a truth and a wisdom here that precedes and transcends human wisdom.

Submission is religious authenticity, and the law is our master.

This is, however, not the only way, and certainly not the best or most canonical way, to understand Torah and what makes its words sacred. The late David Hartman z”l wrote these stark words in his last book, *The God Who Hates Lies* (2011):

Halakha should be engaged as an open-ended

educational framework rather than a binding normative one. Anyone repelled, perhaps, by those who seek to justify and sustain some of the tradition's systematic immoralities – who smugly deny expression to any doubt or uncertainty, claiming a monopoly on absolute truth—is invited to join me on this pilgrimage.

Similarly, Barry Wimpfheimer (Narrating the Law, 2011) wrote about Jewish law that it ought to be seen as “a cultural discourse or language rather than a systemic code”. By seeing it that way, we get “a richer description of life within a Jewish legal culture,” and it becomes about “Jewish law as it might be lived, rather than how it is codified.”

This was the vision of Hartman and the many others who shared it: Torah should be seen as a means, and not as an imposed end. This is the alternative understanding of אָשַׁר תִּשִׂים לְפָנֵינוּ. The laws are placed “before us” in the sense of being offered to us, where we are, and not from some eternally valid place beyond us, take it or leave it. It is, in this view, always on our table, in our surroundings, trying to speak and relate to who and where we are. It is hoping and expecting that we will use our minds, our hearts, our intuitions, our spiritual insights, to develop a culture of Jewish living that will modify the texts, but in doing so, fulfill what Torah is all about: creating that more perfect union, that better society, the more compassionate and humane community. It is a project in which the law is a servant to the people to whom it was given. Particularly today, with so much cruelty and immorality evident in our society and in too many of its actors, we need the courage to challenge those inhumanities with the powerful voice of this more humane view of what Torah is, of what all law should be. This parashah is not to be taken as a paradigm

of a legal system that demands the subjugation of our minds and hearts. It was placed before us in order to launch a legal culture that each succeeding generation must take responsibility for, lest indefensible understandings of it succeed in thwarting the sacred and humane goals of its Author. (*Gordon Tucker is Vice Chancellor for Religious Life and Engagement, and Assistant Professor of Jewish Philosophy at JTS*)

Parashat Mishpatim: The Immutable Kindness of Law by Shana Krakowski

<https://www.yeshivatmaharat.org/post/parshat-mishpatim-the-immutable-kindness-of-law>

Some lucky souls have described times in their life where they have had a spiritual awakening, or even what felt like an experience of God. Often these experiences are described as expansive, joyful and a feeling of connectedness. In the parsha before Mishpatim the Jewish people have just experienced God speaking to them and delivering a Godly message in the form of the Ten Commandments. I imagine this was the most intense experience they had ever experienced. They directly received the most important commandments from God.

It is then quite strange that our parsha, the very following parsha, Parshat Mishpatim, opens with the words: “*V’eleh hamishpatim asher tasim lifneihem,*” “These are the laws that you should place before them (Exodus 21:1).”

Didn’t we just have Moshe placing the most important and divine laws before them in the last parsha? Are these the rules or are the Ten Commandments the rules. Are these add-ons? And if so, why do we need add-ons?

The parsha then goes on to list almost all of the main mitzvot we are familiar with: from the laws of slavery, to murder, theft, the holidays and keeping Shabbat. The Ramban, the 13th century commentator, explains this parsha as the expansion or explanation of the Ten Commandments. For example when it says “lo tachmod”—“do not covet,” it needs to explain the rules of theft and all other laws of property, translating “lo tachmod” into daily interactions between people. In other words, the Ten Commandments are the big general concepts, and the “mishpatim” translate them into law.

There is a deeper message here in this juxtaposition. The Ramban is highlighting for us that, as humans, we may have powerful moments of inspiration and we may have grand ideals, but without nitty-gritty laws, the life we live will not be holy. We need these rules to keep our interactions in the real world holy, even after we come down from the mountaintop. When inspiration fails us and our other human emotions and impulses take over, we need laws to live our values.

A question still remains about the wording of the first line of the parsha: “V’eleh hamishpatim asher tasim lifneihem.” The word “V’eleh”—“and these” makes it sound almost as if it is negating the last list of laws as if to say THESE are the laws. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, the German Orthodox rabbi (1808 -1888), writes in his commentary on the Torah that they are not negating the commandments in last week’s parsha; rather they are inherently connected. He notes that the letter “i” of “V’eleh,” the “And” of “And these are the laws,” connects the two parshiyot. The word “and” connotes that these laws are in addition to the last ones, or that they are an explanation of them. In the very last law in Parshat Yitro we learn about the prohibition to use a sword to build an altar. Rav Hirsch writes:

“To this principle the connecting “vav” connects the laws. The laws that are to establish the upbuilding of Jewish society on the basis of justice and humanity. Thereby the sword i.e. violence and harshness will be banished from the society of the Jewish state” (R’ Hirsch on the Torah, Exodus 21:1)

Here R’ Hirsch gives us insight into the purpose of the laws in this parsha. The Ten Commandments are the holy insights that we experience, but when we go to set up a functioning society, we need to be able to establish a society based on justice and humanity. When looking at the whole of the laws in this parsha, we can see this thread running through them all. The laws span daily interactions between cattle and property, murder and theft, but also emphasize the most vulnerable members of society, the stranger, the poor, and the orphan.

The two parshiyot together, Yitro and Mishpatim, serve as complementary texts that speak to human nature and experience. Last week’s parsha gives space for the otherworldly revelation that some may experience, the sense of awe and holiness that gives us inspiration to do and be good. However, the Torah then grounds these great ideals in guidelines that shape the minutia of all of our daily interactions, giving space for the kindness and humanity to take hold in the immutable power of law. *(For Shana's Bio:*

<https://www.yeshivatmaharat.org/scholar/krakowski-burstein/shana>)

Yahrtzeits

Lenny Levin remembers his mother Hadassah Ruth Routtenberg Levin on Monday February 16th.

Kol Rina remember Susan Marx on Sunday February 15th

