

The Big Let down?

Consider the opening verse of this week's Sidra. "And these are the *Mishpatim*, the civil laws, that you will place before them". Rashi elsewhere explains that *Mishpatim* are the type of laws that are self understood and can be comprehended easily. In other words, laws that if the Torah had not been given we would still have understood them. This is in stark contrast to the *Chukim*, the statutes, which are the nature of laws that defy any rational explanation.

The Sidra then goes on to detail this category of law that seems to affect just about every feature of daily life. You name it; it is to be found here, for example, the laws to do with the correct treatment of slaves to the law of damages and compensation; the law of not taking bribery when sitting in judgement, to those of dealing compassionately with the widow and orphan; the law of lending money or property to ones fellow to those of returning lost property. The Sidra even touches upon laws that are not *Mishpatim* at all, Shemittah and Kashrut Laws are amongst them and very many others.

Last week the Sidra was Yitro and spoke about the most important event in our history; the revelation and the giving of the Ten Commandments at Sinai. Would it not have been more correct after telling us about these basic, all encompassing Mitzvoth of the Torah, that we now emphasize the more spiritual aspects of Judaism?- laws perhaps relating to the construction of the Mishkan, in reference to our daily prayers, or laws that lead us to a greater appreciation and closeness to G-d, rather than the listing of the long segment of seemingly mundane laws, the *Mishpatim* that seem to permeate this Sidra?

The Mechilta says on the opening words “And these are the *Mishpatim*”. Whenever the Hebrew word “and these” is used at the beginning of the sentence it is coming to add information to what we have learnt previously. In our instance what does “And these are the *Mishpatim*” come to teach us? “Just as the contents of the former commandments (i.e. the Ten commandments) were given from Sinai, so too these laws are from Sinai.”

The message is elemental to Jewish thought. Judaism permeates every facet of our being. We should not divorce what occurs in the school, the office or the home from our religious life. The values of being a Jew affect how we deal honestly in business, or how we treat the orphan or the widow and our fellow beings with compassion and love. This is the reason why the Torah, after instructing us about the Ten Commandments, brings us down to earth and says “And these are the *Mishpatim*,” that we need to apply the values of Torah to our mundane everyday life. And through this we create the essential connection with G-d.

The words of Rabbi Zalman Posner in his book “Think Jewish” ring true. “What does Judaism have to say about serving G-d and authentic religious experience? There may be a single word to sum up Judaism and of course that word must be understood- **totality**. Whatever a Jew does can be a channel, a bridge between himself and G-d or it can be a barrier, a wall separating him from G-d”. The choice is in our hands.