Covenant & Conversation

FAMILY EDITION

Jonathan Sacks
THE RABBI SACKS LEGACY

MISHPATIM · משפטים

BASED ON THE TEACHINGS OF **RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS** זצ"ל

COVENANT & CONVERSATION SUMMARY

In the **Details**

- **The full essay written by Rabbi Sacks is available on our website.**

Mishpatim begins with the phrase: "And these are the laws you are to set before them" (Shemot 21:1).

Rashi makes two important observations on this text. First, the phrase *va'eyleh*, meaning "and these" always signals continuity. Therefore, just as the Asseret HaDibrot - the Ten Utterances - were given at Sinai as we saw last week in Parshat Yitro, so too were these civil laws. Second, the Torah says "that you shall set before them" to teach that laws must be explained fully, like "a fully laid table with everything ready for eating." It is not enough to teach the words of the law; one must help people understand its meaning and purpose.

From this, Rashi draws three remarkable principles that have shaped Judaism ever since.

The first is that just as Judaism's great ideas come from God, so do the details. There are those who believe that what is holy in Judaism is its broad vision - justice, freedom, compassion - most powerfully expressed at Sinai. But Judaism insists that God is found not only in ideals, but in practical laws. Freedom is not just an idea; it means concrete protections. In an ancient world where slavery was accepted, the Torah limited it, gave slaves rest on Shabbat, and required their release. These laws did not abolish slavery instantly, but they transformed it. Slavery became a temporary condition, not a permanent identity. **In Judaism, God is not only in heaven or philosophy, but in everyday life. God is in the details.**

The second principle is that civil law is not secular law. Judaism does not divide life into "religious" and "non-religious" spaces. That is why the Torah places civil law next to laws about the altar, and why the Sanhedrin was to be near the Temple. Justice itself is a religious act. The Torah's vision of justice is rooted not in abstract theory, but in Jewish memory. "Do not oppress a stranger. You know what it is to be a stranger, for you yourselves were strangers in Egypt" (Shemot 23:9). **Jewish law grows out of lived experience and the moral responsibility to build a different kind of society - one based on human dignity and the image of God.**

That is why the Torah insists on fairness in courts of law: no favouritism, no mob pressure, no bending justice for convenience. God is found not only in the soul, but in the public square - in markets, courts, and systems of power. There must be no gap between the meeting-place of people and the meeting-place of God.

The third principle is the most radical of all: **law does not belong to lawyers alone. It belongs to everyone.** Rashi insists that laws must be taught so people understand them, not merely repeat them. This idea later gave rise to the Shulchan Aruch, literally "the laid table." From the earliest times, Judaism expected every Jew to know the law. Legal knowledge was not the property of an elite; it was "the heritage of the congregation of Jacob."

Judaism is a religion of law not because it lacks love - it commands love of God and neighbour - but because without justice, love and freedom cannot survive. Love alone does not free a slave from chains.

The sedra of Mishpatim, with its many laws, can seem disappointing after the drama of 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.**

Around the **Shabbat Table**

1. Why is it important that not only the Ten Commandments but also the civil laws were given at Har Sinai?
2. How does Halachah's repeated focus on 'the stranger' help form our understanding of justice?
3. What does it mean for legal knowledge to be a 'heritage of every Jew' How can we ensure this remains true?

Takeaway Thoughts

Living a full and complete life is not just about having grand ideas, but about paying close attention to the details of how we treat others, especially those who are vulnerable. Our big vision must be brought down to earth.

Exploring the Parsha

WITH SARA LAMM

BASED ON THE TEACHINGS OF **RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS** ז"צ

THIS WEEK'S TORAH PORTION

The Parsha in a Nutshell

Parshat Mishpatim immediately follows the pomp and circumstance at Har. Sinai, providing the detailed civil laws for the new free society.

Mishpatim actually means laws or ordinances These laws cover everything from property rights, to personal injury, to how to treat a slave. There are laws on theft and loans, on keeping seasonal festivals, on the law against mixing meat and milk, and on tefillah (prayer.)

Placing these "everyday" rules right after the Ten Commandments shows that God cares about the details of social justice just as much as the big ideas.

The parsha of Mishpatim focuses on creating a fair court system and protecting the most vulnerable: the stranger, the widow, and the orphan, It reminds Bnai Yisrael that they, too, were once strangers in Egypt. The parsha ends with the people accepting this covenant by uttering the famous words, *Na'aseh v'nishma - we will do and we will hear all that Hashem commands us.*

Then Moshe climbs to the top of Har Sinai to receive the Torah from God, leaving Aharon and Hur in charge of the nation of Israel. He will return after 40 days and 40 nights.

Parsha Activity

The Law of the Land

Divide the group into teams. Present them with a slightly absurd scenario that requires a new rule to be established (e.g., "A new pet is introduced to the house, but it keeps eating everyone's socks", or "The family is starting a new breakfast dance"). Each team must propose three specific, detailed laws to govern the situation. The laws must be impartial, protect the most vulnerable (e.g., the youngest sibling), and include a consequence for breaking them. The goal is to learn how difficult and necessary it is to translate a general principle ("be fair") into practical, detailed legislation.

A STORY FOR THE AGES

A Square Peg in a Round Hole

In April 1970, the Apollo 13 space mission was taking place. Brave astronauts were rocketing to the moon when an explosion crippled the spacecraft. To survive, the three astronauts had to use the Lunar Module (LM) as a lifeboat. A critical problem arose: the LM's air filters were square, but the spare filters they had were round, and carbon dioxide levels were rising dangerously.

Engineers at Mission Control had to act without delay, or the astronauts would soon be unable to breathe. And they had to come up with something that could last for days longer than they had originally anticipated. Thinking at lightning speed, they designed a solution using only the materials the astronauts had on board: plastic bags, cardboard, and duct tape. they devised a way to fit the square filter into the round hole.

This small, detailed piece of engineering, a makeshift adapter, was essential. It saved the lives of the

three astronauts, proving that even in the most dramatic, life-or-death situations, salvation depends on the smallest, most practical details.

This echoes the lesson of Mishpatim: the grand vision of life is saved by the detailed, practical laws of how we live.

Cards & Conversation

IN DIALOGUE WITH THE TORAH

"Do not oppress a stranger or exploit him, for you yourselves were strangers in the land of Egypt."
- Shemot 22:20

QUESTION: Why is the command not to oppress the stranger repeated more than almost any other in the Torah?

Rabbi Sacks on Shemot 22:20 (in the Koren Sacks Humash) offers an answer:

"There is only one reply strong enough to answer the question 'Why should I not hate the stranger?': Because the stranger is me."

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WE WILL LEARN & WE WILL DO

Parsha in **Practice**

Mitzva of the Week

Welcoming the Stranger
(Shemot 23:9)

The mitzva to welcome the stranger is repeated many times throughout the Torah. The idea makes empathy the foundation of a just society. Because we remember being oppressed in Egypt, we are required to create a different society where every person is treated with dignity and protected by fair laws. Our laws are driven by a vision of human worth.

"The stranger is one who lives outside the normal securities of home and belonging. He or she is, or feels, alone – and throughout the Torah, God is especially sensitive to the sigh of the oppressed, the feelings of the rejected, the cry of the unheard. That is the emotional dimension of the command." - Rabbi Sacks

Practically Speaking

How to treat a stranger

The mitzva of the stranger is not just about laws; it's about how we act every day. It's a principle that reminds us that everyone, especially someone new or on the outside, deserves to feel welcome.

In our own lives, this means actively looking for the "stranger". This could be someone outside of the community, or just standing on the edge; the new student, the quiet person at the party, or the person who looks lonely. It could be a newcomer to shul or to the neighbourhood. We must make a conscious effort to include them, remembering how we would want to be treated if we were the one standing alone.

Try it out

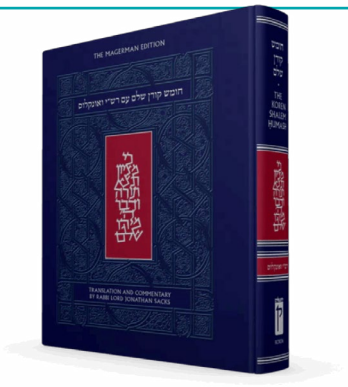
YOUNG STUDENTS:

This week, look for someone new or quiet in your class or group. Make a point of saying hello and asking them to join your game or activity. Notice how good it feels to help someone feel included.

ADVANCING STUDENTS:

Pay attention to a social situation in which a group excludes someone, even unintentionally. Choose one moment to step in and actively include the person who is on the outside. Think about how your action connects to the command to welcome the stranger and how it changes the atmosphere for everyone.

Learning in **Layers**



Guiding you through Torah step by step, with insights from the Koren Sacks Humash with translation and commentary by Rabbi Sacks. Each step takes us a little deeper and invites 'Torah as Conversation,' just as Rabbi Sacks taught.

Moral Frameworks for Complex Situations

LAYER 1: LOOK AT THE TORAH TEXT: SHEMOT 22:1

" אִם-בַּמַּחְתֶּרֶת יִמָּצֵא הַגַּנָּב, וְהֻכָּה וָמֵת--אֵין לוֹ, דָּמִים. "

LAYER 2: READ RABBI SACKS' TRANSLATION

"If a burglar is caught tunnelling in, and is struck and killed, there is no bloodguilt on his account. But if the sun has risen on him, there is bloodguilt on his account."

LAYER 3: THINK ABOUT WHAT IT MEANS

What do you think should and should not be done if an intruder enters someone's home at night? What do you think the Torah is teaching us here about self-defence, violence, and guilt after the fact?

LAYER 4: LEARN FROM RABBI SACKS' COMMENTARY

Where the Ten Commandments presented us with moral absolutes: "Do not murder," we now begin to deal with situations of moral complexity. Self-defence, we see here, is permitted in Jewish law (Sanhedrin 72a). Yet the rules of defence and self-defence are not an open-ended permission to kill...

The principle at stake, according to the Siftei Chachamim, is the minimum use of force...
Halacha is here beginning to give us a framework through which to examine and refine our moral choices.

LAYER 5: REFLECT AND RESPOND

The challenge of morality lies in the complexity of knowing how to act in real life. This law, which permits self-defence, immediately introduces the profound question of responsibility. The Torah grants the right to fight back, but it also imposes the obligation to use force only to the minimum necessary. This means that even when justified, we are still required to struggle with the moral cost of our actions.

Halacha provides the legal boundary, but it is our conscience that must navigate the space within it, ensuring that our response is measured and that our character is not compromised by the necessary use of force. Our moral life is ultimately defined by the difficult choices we make in the grey areas. The Torah helps us to shine a light on those shadowy areas to help us see a clear path through.

1. Can an action be legally permitted but still feel morally "wrong"?
2. How does having a "framework" for our choices help us when we are uncertain?
3. Are there some situations that feel more "grey" than others?

- Find out more about the Koren Sacks Humash at rabbisacks.org/books/the-koren-sacks-humash

Jonathan Sacks
THE RABBI SACKS LEGACY

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