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Parashat Mishpatim

Exodus 21:1-24:18

Taught By:

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SUMMARY

Mishpatim are laws or rules. The *Torah* portion begins with a law about freeing a Hebrew slave after six years of serving. In the seventh year the Hebrew slave goes free, unless he wants to stay with his master. In this case he is brought to the door or doorpost and his ear is pierced by his master.

Other laws include not cursing one's parents; laws about what to do if someone gets hurt, and laws that help us understand how to treat people with less power--like widows, orphans, and strangers. We also read laws that help us understand the responsibilities of witnesses, people who find lost items, and people who see an animal that is working too hard. We learn that we are supposed to help such an animal--even if it belongs to someone who hates us.

Parashat Mishpatim also teaches us not to go along with a majority opinion if it is wrong or unjust. We learn laws of the Sabbatical year--a year of rest from farming the land--and the rule against boiling a goat in its mother's milk.

G!d promises to be there for Israel if Israel is loyal to the covenant. The Israelites agree to be loyal and say all together:

“יְנַשְׂא וְנִשְׂאָהּ” All that G!d has spoken we will do and we will hear / understand.” (Exodus 24:7).

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1) Chapter 23, verse 2 teaches:

לֹא־תִהְיֶה אַחֲרֵי־רַבִּים לָרֶעַת

Do not follow after the majority to do bad.

Can you think of a time in your life when this felt like an important rule to follow?

2) What do you think can give people strength to stand up for what's right when they are surrounded by others who are not?

GABRIEL: If you know something is right, your strength can come from the hope that standing up for what's right can make a difference and from the hope that others will join you.

MICHAELA: In studying the Civil Rights Movement we learned that some people got a lot of strength from music. The lyrics of songs or singing together with other people can give a person strength. Also--sometimes just talking with other people and sharing your feelings about something can give you the strength to stand up for what's right.



MICHAELA: At recess, when we play 4-square, sometimes it isn't clear if someone is out or not--so we vote. It is important that everyone votes according to what they see and what they know is true, because if everyone just voted to make someone out, then the game wouldn't be fun and if everyone always voted to keep people in, then new people wouldn't get a chance to play. Also--if everyone just voted to keep their friends in, then the rules of the game would really have no point and the game wouldn't be fun that way, either.

3) Chapter 23, verse 5 teaches, “When you see the donkey of one who hates you crouching low under its burden, do not let yourself leave it to him--help the animal with the one who hates you.” If someone hates you why in the world would the *Torah* tell us that we have to help that person's suffering animal?

MICHAELA: Maybe we are taught to help the person because when you work with someone and help them, it is hard for them to hate you. Maybe this teaching isn't really about helping a donkey, it's *really* teaching us that the way to stop someone from hating you is to offer them help.

GABRIEL: I think that the *Torah* is teaching us that we absolutely can't ignore a donkey's suffering--even when it belongs to someone who hates us, but I agree with Michaela that maybe this teaching isn't *really* about donkeys. Maybe what the *Torah* is teaching us is that if we can't ignore the suffering of a donkey--even when it belongs to someone who hates us--then we *definitely* can't ignore the suffering of any human being. Whenever we see a person in need of help, we *have to* do whatever we can to help.