

Apologies in advance to Lael.

This week's parasha, Mishpatim, rides on the heels of Revelation and the Decalogue, starting with Hashem telling Moses what will be the first set of laws of many from this point on in the Torah. These rules, these mishpatim, include things like the ethical treatment of slaves, how to deal with gore-crazy oxen, what to do when an animal one person has borrowed from another dies, the boundaries of what counts as self-defense from a thief, and, of course, You Shall Not Allow A Sorceress To Live.

I feel like I often see people joke about these kinds of laws, implying they're ridiculous or outdated ("oh, great, now I know what to do when *my* ox gores my *neighbor's* ox!"), but, setting aside the fact that *you* probably would've owned oxen as recently as 100-ish years ago, what struck me while reading through these was just how reasonable and down-to-earth they are (especially considering the crashing heavens of Sinai just prior). Sometimes, an ox is just gonna gore someone. What do you do? Put it down, but don't punish the owner, *unless* the ox was in the habit of goring, in which case the owner was negligent and bears responsibility. If someone lets their livestock graze bare someone else's field or vineyard, or starts a fire that spreads to another's grain, then they must pay compensation for the destroyed crops. Some of these rules do seem somewhat silly at times, but that's just what happens with any sufficiently old body of law; such as the fact that it's a crime in London to lead a cow while drunk, shake a doormat in the street after 8am, or handle salmon in suspicious circumstances. Or, take the 4th amendment of the U.S. Constitution: successfully prohibiting soldiers from shacking up in my house during peacetime since 1791, G-d Bless America.

But, how can we find values in these laws without literally enforcing them as written, whether because they're silly or because their punishments don't quite mesh with modern sensibilities? For that, we can find parallels between Rabbinic interpretation of halakha and judicial review; both ensure that laws can be reexamined when new circumstances arise that either weren't considered, or didn't exist at all, at the time the law was originally written. In traditional Jewish fashion, however, Rabbinic interpretation allows for 2 Jews to disagree on their 3 opinions, whereas if that happens in the U.S. courts system that's called a higher court reversal babeyyyy.

Continuing on this line of thought, I'd like to share one of my favorite Jewish stories, which I promise will be relevant: A rabbi and a soapmaker are going for a stroll. As they walk along, the soapmaker challenges the rabbi: "What good is Torah? After thousands of years of teaching about honesty and truth, chesed and love, justice and peace, the world is still full of misery and distress." The

rabbi considers this, but stays quiet. Further on, they come upon a young child playing on the side of the road, covered in dirt and grime. The rabbi turns to the soapmaker and says, “What use is soap? With all of the soap that you sell in your shop, and the many different types of soap that exist in the world, this child is still filthy.” “But Rabbi,” the soapmaker protests, “soap can’t do any good unless you use it!” “So it is with Torah,” the rabbi replies. “We must work to apply its words to our lives.”

This lesson feels especially relevant to me this week, in the wake of actions taken by the Executive branch of the U.S. Government. I would venture to say that we’re perhaps in the midst of a constitutional crisis, but that only means anything if officials in the other branches of government act to protect the rules they pledged to uphold: they must work to apply the words to their lives. (A line spoken by Yitro in last week’s parsha also comes to mind: that judges should be trustworthy men who spurn ill-gotten gain.)

Anyways! Winding down, now, I’d like to look at the placement of these mishpatim in the Torah. Right before this, all of Am Yisrael experiences Revelation at Sinai, a pivotal and holy moment in the history of our people. Directly after, Moshe, Aharon, two of the latter’s sons, and seventy elders of Israel climbed up a mountain, performed a sacrifice, and beheld “the God of Israel—under whose feet was the likeness of a pavement of sapphire.” I... don’t really understand what’s going on there, but suffice it to say that it’s also a revelatory experience with the Divine. So what do we make of this set of rules being given a place smack in the middle of such a transcendent procession?

The way I see it, **this, too, is revelation**: how to hold someone accountable for an act they didn’t intend to commit; how to look your neighbor in the eye after you’ve wronged them; how to uphold justice when the details are murky; how to keep living in this imperfect and often broken world, in spite of the circumstances. And may we all bring a piece of *that* Torah, into our lives. Shabbat Shalom.