

Bringing the Farbrengen Home

CRASH LANDING

by Tzipah Wertheimer

The relationship between G-d and the Jewish people is compared to that of husband and wife. The giving of the Torah is like a marriage between the two. Moses ascended on high and G-d descended below – finite connected with Infinite and an everlasting union was achieved. The sights that are normally seen were heard and the sounds seen – it was an other worldly event and our senses were awakened in a way that was previously unheard of.

The giving of the Torah was the ultimate drama and quite literally an out-of-body experience. The marriage between G-d and the Jewish people was awesome, amazing, utterly intense – there aren't words to describe the event.

That all happened last week.

This week the Torah portion speaks about property damage, the laws of lending and borrowing, and other civil laws. It sort of feels like a tremendous adrenaline drop. We went from hearing lightning and seeing thunder – utter rapture – to figuring out how to deal with oxen who break our neighbor's fences.

This transformation from the all-encompassing high to the seemingly mundane plays itself out in many ways in our lives. Romantic relationships sometimes start with an emotional infatuation but they need to be followed by practical commitment if they are going to last.



This week we focus on the details of the laws, how to treat slaves (a very humane system at that), the punishments for murder, kidnapping, assault and theft and how to manage the court system. Also included are laws warning against abuse of strangers; the observance of the seasonal festivals, the prohibition against cooking meat with milk; and the mitzvah of prayer. Altogether, the Parshah of Mishpatim contains 53 mitzvot.

It might feel a bit like a crash landing after a glorious honeymoon – but it's not. The "honeymoon" or the initial surge of excitement and fascination at the beginning of a new relationship is nothing if it can't transfer over into practical daily living. Romantic relationships are not simple, books upon books have been written on the complex topic of relationships and marriage.

The giving of the Torah followed by the civil laws is a paradigm that can shed much light on how to develop a healthy relationship. The drama and excitement of the "wedding ceremony" (Giving of the Torah) shows us that there is a real need for uplifting romance. That aspect of a relationship cannot be ignored. While two people can have a calm and functional relationship without romance – it wouldn't be a complete union. On the other hand infatuation alone won't lead to much happiness.

The highest of high descending below and inviting the finite people to connect to the infinite. This thrill can permeate our regular daily actions – the relationship between G-d and the Jewish people can be both practical and other worldly. This is the gift of the Torah, the union of Heaven and Earth.

Hayom Yom

27 Shevat

My father writes in one of his maamarim: Early chassidim resolved in their souls to refrain from anything that is permissible (by Torah law) but for which they felt a desire and urge. This breaks the passion.

Just Me A שו"ת Question

Q: Why do we jump during Kiddush Levana? And why do we shake our tzitzis at the end?

A: Rabbi Reuven Margolies (Margolius HaYam, p.85) writes that the Talmud states (Menahot 43b) that one who performs the mitzvah of tzitzis with alacrity merits to greet the Shechina. Since one who performs the mitzvah of Kiddush Levana is also said to greet the Shechina (Sanhedrin 42a), we therefore look at our tzitzis during Kiddush Levana.

The Meiri writes that the word in Hebrew in Sanhedrin 42a which is usually translated as "lean on one another's shoulders," also means to jump. Thus, there is a custom to jump with joy while reciting Kiddush Levana. 🎉



Who Is Wise?

40 Below

by Rabbi Shaul Wertheimer

I remember the day of my Bar Mitzvah fairly well. How could I not? It was 40 degrees below zero (which is the same in celcius and farenheit, by the way).

When I was preparing to become a Bar Mitzvah, Mishpatim did not seem to be the most exciting Torah portion. After all, it deals primarily with civil law, something that my 13-year-old brain was not particularly interested in.

A "few" years have passed since that frigid day in Calgary, and I've come to appreciate that anything can be (and is) interesting -- if you let yourself be interested.

A good number of Torah laws are associated with damages and property laws, and we read about them in Mishpatim (Exodus 21:1 - 24:18).

One such example, are the laws concerning one who digs a pit in a public area, lest someone fall in and be injured or worse.

Our sages explain that these laws do not refer only to a pit; any type of obstruction in the public way is also included.

So, in other words, there are two types of obstructions that are prohibited: 1. A pit; 2. a pile.

These two obstructions represent the two facets of a relationship. The pit, which is dug into the ground, represents the recipient. On the other hand, the pile represents the giver, for, in a sense, it extends towards you.

These two facets exist not only as two dynamics of a relationship, but they exist within each individual.

A person in the mode of a recipient recognizes the truth of the statement:



"Who is wise? One who learns from everyone" (Ethics ch.4). Even if the person is on a lofty level, he or she is still required to learn from everyone.

One on the path of a giver is aware that everyone is required to give tzedakah, even a poor man.

A slight twist:

These two methods not only exist as different modes within oneself, but they also are representative of two approaches in dealing with other people.

Sometimes I may act as a "pit," which means that if you approach me for help, I will certainly do what I am able to. I am ready and happy to assist you -- provided, that is, that you approach me.

Other times, I act more like a "pile," which extends upwards. This represents that I won't wait for another person to ask for assistance, but I will approach them first.

While the pit and the pile begin as hazards, we now have a positive lesson from them in our interpersonal relationships.

It's like the difference between a guest at our Shabbat table who helps when asked, or who volunteers.

While both are of value, the Torah, I believe, ultimately wants us to be more like a "pile" when dealing with others. We are not meant to wait until we are approached, but rather we can take the initiative and reach out to others with love and care.

Chassidic Story

Moshe didn't believe half of the miracle stories he had heard about the Baal Shem Tov; he was not convinced that he should make the journey to Mezibuzh. Despite his hesitations, his wife continued to urge him to go to the Baal Shem Tov.

Realizing that he had nothing to lose, he finally obliged.

As soon as he arrived in the Baal Shem Tov's presence, he felt a certain calming effect. He began to cry profusely and unburdened himself to the great Baal Shem Tov.

"Trust in the Almighty G-d," said the Baal Shem Tov. Handing him a silver coin, he continued, "At the next market day in your home town, a peasant will approach you and offer his wares for sale. Buy it immediately and then come back to me for further instructions."

Moshe arrived back home, already having lost the sense of comfort he felt while in the presence of the holy rabbi. How could the Baal Shem Tov possibly help? he wondered.

His wife said, "Do what the Baal Shem Tov said! What have you got to lose?"

The next week, Moshe went to the market. A young peasant approached him and offered him a lambskin in exchange for one silver coin. Moshe handed over the coin he had received from the Baal Shem Tov, and took the lambskin.

He returned home and after telling his wife of what had transpired, he set out to journey to the Baal Shem Tov, as he had been instructed. When he arrived, he showed the Baal Shem Tov the lambskin he had purchased. Running his fingers over it, the Baal Shem Tov exclaimed, "Remarkable! A good purchase, indeed. Listen carefully: next week, Count Vissotzky is making a large birthday party for himself; many people will bring him gifts. Give him this lambskin as a birthday present."

Arriving home, Moshe's sad demeanor was apparent. "A lambskin for a birthday gift? The Count is sure to receive many lavish gifts... my gift will look paltry in comparison!"

(To be continued)

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