

## Bringing meaning to life

Parasha with Rabbi Benji Levy

SHEMOT

VA'ERA

BO

BESHALACH

YITRO

MISHPATIM

TERUMA

TETZAVEH

KI TISA

VAYAKHEL

PEKUDEI

# MISHPATIM

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# JUGGLING THROUGH LIFE

**Immediately** following the monumental episode of the Ten Commandments, the Torah launches into the scrupulous detailing of civil and tort laws, before returning back to the revelation at Sinai. The somewhat strange imbedding of these daily rules within the intensity and spirituality of the revelation is perhaps indicative of the Talmudic dictum that in order to be a truly pious person, one should be careful with the laws of damages.<sup>1</sup> Here, the notion that Judaism's sanctity extends beyond the ritual into the routine is celebrated. Both the grand ideas and their vehicle in the form of everyday laws are of equal importance, for, 'just as the former commands [the Ten Commandments] were given at Sinai, so these [civil laws] were given at Sinai.'<sup>2</sup>

**The** question, however, may be asked as to whether or not this should translate in the reverse - that is to say, whilst the Torah encourages the infusion of secularity with spirituality, should the spiritual be imbued with the secular in the same way?

**In** an interesting episode following the giving of the Torah, '... to the nobles of the children of Israel He did not send forth His Hand and they gazed at God and they ate and they drank.'<sup>3</sup> Rashi explains that the fact that the verse states that God 'did not send forth His Hand' implies that they were supposed to be punished, but so as not to ruin the excitement of the revelation, their punishment was withheld.<sup>4</sup> Why were they slated to be punished? Rashi explains that the reason is actually contained within the words of the verse itself - that is, they tried to eat and drink while gazing at God.<sup>5</sup> On a simple level, it seems that the problem is a lack of respect. God is not comparable to a movie that one can simply sit back and gaze at while eating and drinking. Every type of interaction, in particular a spiritual association with God, requires more than passive involvement.

**Relationships require presence, active participation and conscious involvement,**

while in this instance, the people were involved in other mundane physical matters, such as food and drink.

**We** are constantly bombarded with activities, with responsibilities, with messages, with notifications and with all modes of communication. It is almost impossible to 'switch off'.

**In adapting to the sensory overload of the twenty-first century, our generation learns to multitask and juggle activities simultaneously.**

While a skilled juggler can often cope with juggling many balls at once, it is almost impossible to firmly grasp more than one or two balls at a time. In addition, every juggler has limits, as the Mishna states: 'when you grasp too much, you do not grasp [anything] - when you [try] grasp a little, you grasp [it all].'<sup>6</sup> In life, where each task often demands a tremendous amount of time and attention, there is always a cost to multitasking.

**With** the nobles of the children of Israel, their ‘punishment’ was an automatic outcome of their actions, the natural price they needed to pay for attempting to multitask in such a moment of holiness. In order to reach the spiritual heights necessary to achieve prophecy, one cannot simply eat and drink during the process.

**In** contrast to the behaviour of these elders, just a few verses later, the Torah tells how, ‘Moses came within the cloud and ascended the mountain...’<sup>7</sup> The usage of the word ‘within’ directly correlates with its use in relation to the splitting of the Reed Sea.<sup>8</sup> The Talmud states that in both cases, the people were literally completely submerged within the activity (Moses within the cloud and the Jewish people within the sea).<sup>9</sup> In response to their unwavering-commitment to the task at hand, God forged a path along which they could emerge. This applies to focus on our family, mindfulness in moments of meaning and focusing on anything we deem as truly important.

**The** juxtaposition of these two reactions to the episode of the giving of the Torah at Sinai - that of the elders who seemed to miss the gravity and intensity of the moment by engaging in mundane physical activities at the same time, and that of Moses who immersed himself entirely within his spiritual mission - indicates two different approaches to balancing the mundane and the spiritual aspects of our life.



**The** verses surrounding the revelation at Sinai, detailing the Torah’s tort and civil laws are testament to the importance of imbuing spiritual meaning within every physical endeavour. At the same time, we need to distinguish between moments that call upon us to infuse the mundane with the spiritual, and moments that require a pure immersion within the holiness of the spiritual experience.

#### **Parasha Fact:**

The Jewish people enthusiastically proclaim *Naase Ve’nishma* (we will do and we will hear). Moses ascends the mountain, and just over a month later the people are worshipping the golden calf. A lot can change in a short period of time, and a moment of inspiration can wear off fast.

#### *Next week in Teruma:*

*The Torah seems to make a grammatical error in its description of the sanctuary, revealing the ultimate places where God dwells.*

#### *Notes*

<sup>1</sup> Babylonian Talmud, Tractate *Bava Kamma* 30a.

<sup>2</sup> Rashi on *Exodus* 21:1.

<sup>3</sup> *Exodus* 24:11.

<sup>4</sup> Rashi on *Exodus* 24:11, based on *Tanchuma, Bebaalotcha* 16.

<sup>5</sup> Rashi ad loc.

<sup>6</sup> Babylonian Talmud, Tractate *Sukkah* 5b.

<sup>7</sup> *Exodus* 24:18. <sup>8</sup> *Exodus* 14:29.

<sup>9</sup> Babylonian Talmud, Tractate *Yoma* 4b.