

Dear Chavraya,

Last week's Torah portion, *Parashat Yitro*, ends with instructions concerning the building of an altar, pertinent to the construction of the *mishkan*, the desert sanctuary. Next week's portion, *Parashat T'rumah*, is devoted entirely to the materials needed for raising the *mishkan*, all to be brought as gifts by the people, offerings of the heart. Either as a bridge between, or as a barrier impeding seamless flow, this week's Torah portion, *Parashat Mishpatim*, has nothing to do with the *mishkan*. The question to be asked then, is why this break between portions having to do with the sanctuary?

Meaning "statutes," "judgements," or "ordinances," *mishpatim* as a legal term refers primarily to social ordinances, or civil law. The first *parasha* that leaves what has been a continuous unfolding of narrative from the very beginning of the Torah, the entire portion of *Mishpatim* is an enumeration of laws. As social ordinances, these are all laws and commandments that speak to the organization of a just society, guiding the work not only of government, but also the interrelationships of people with each other in pursuit of the common good. Recognizing no artificial divide, but offering an overarching moral framework of human responsibility, *Parashat Mishpatim* joins together the spiritual and political realms as parts of one whole. Speaking to the "bridge" nature of this portion, a twentieth century commentator, Rabbi Zalman Sorotzkin, says simply that *the Holy One hates robbery in regard to offerings, i.e., the spiritual*. He goes on to say that *Mishpatim* serves as a warning between the two portions concerning the sanctuary that *everyone should be exacting in regard to their silver and gold, whether they are 'kosher' according to Torah law, and only then can one give of them for the building of a house of God*.

Amidst the violence of foreclosure and betrayal in these harsh economic times, Torah offers an economic model that we would do well to draw from to create a more caring society. As a way of relationship among the people who form a society, Torah economics is concerned primarily for the commonweal. Not a single person is expendable, the wellbeing of society rooted in the wellbeing of the individual, and in the dignity and equality of all. In *Parashat Mishpatim* we are warned not to oppress the widow, the orphan, the stranger. These three come to represent throughout Torah the most vulnerable of society. Speaking to our hearts, God reminds us, *for you know the soul of a stranger*, recalling then our own experience for the first time of thirty-six times in the Torah, *because you were strangers in the land of Egypt*.

Immediately following this verse of moral refrain, we are told to observe the *sh'mittah/sabbatical* year, allowing fields to lie fallow every seventh year. Not only a basis for a "green economy," the sabbatical year is meant to underscore human equality before God. Not allowed to plant, only produce which grows of itself can be harvested. All become gleaners on land without boundaries now, landowner and landless rubbing shoulders as equals. In nineteenth century Germany, Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch wrote of the collective moral power of observing the Sabbatical year: *By so doing, the nation proclaims that it, too, is in fact a nation of 'strangers and aliens' on its own soil.... Then the arrogance that causes people, boasting of the soil they call their own, to act brutally and unfeelingly toward the*

unpropertied, melts away, yielding place to love for the stranger, the poor, and even for animals, as creatures of God entitled to dwell upon God's soil, which they all share in common.

This Shabbat is also *Shabbat Sh'kalim/Shabbat of the Shekels*, the first of four special Shabbatot that bring us to the month of *Nisan*. As the final aliyah, *maftir*, we read from a second *sefer Torah*, from *Parashat Ki Tissah*, the law of the half-shekel, a tax of a very small amount required of every person for the upkeep of the holy Temple, *the rich shall not give more and the poor shall not give less than half a shekel*. No person is complete in building up a society, each one needing the other. Toward social harmony, we are each but half a shekel in need of our sisters and brothers to be whole, *shalem*. That is the root and the starting point of *shalom*.

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Victor