

Dear Chavraya,

I spent a few hours in South Dakota this week, making a virtual visit via Skype to a college classroom in which a friend of mine was teaching a religion course. My friend is a Christian minister, himself very progressive in matters of both religion and politics. Reconnecting in recent years, not having seen each other since I was a college student at Clark University and he was a campus minister in Worcester, he asked me if I would speak with his class about Judaism. He had warned me that his students were rather conservative in matters of both religion and politics. I welcomed the opportunity to engage with people very much outside the social and intellectual milieu in which I generally live and work. The questions the students asked quickly revealed the biases of the narrow religious context from which the questions innocently emerged.

Judging from their questions, it seemed likely that most of the students had never met a Jew. There was distress that I regarded Jesus, however respectfully, as a human being like the rest of us and like the other teachers of his time. One student had heard of Bar Mitzvah, but none were sure what it was. As we approached the end of the time we had, I took that proverbial "one last question." The student explained how they had Jesus and learned love and nonviolence from him. The implication of the very innocent, almost pitying question, was what about us, what did we do to learn these ways in the absence of such a source? I was pleased with the reference to nonviolence, feeling that my friend had managed to introduce the vocabulary of a way of life inherent to which must be respect and appreciation for difference. For a moment, I had to acknowledge within myself a certain place of bitterness in order to transcend it. "So much for Christian ownership of love and nonviolence," I thought, as images flashed before me of the Crusades and the Inquisition, of a program whose images tormented my grandmother throughout her life, a story I had earlier shared with the class.

At the core of this "one last question," was the slanderous and tired polemic that Christianity is a religion of love, and Judaism a religion of law. It seemed appropriate to be in the context of this week's Torah portion, *Parashat Mishpatim*. Meaning "ordinances," "statutes," "judgments," this Torah portion is the first one in the steady flow since the very beginning with *B'reishit* in which there is a break in the steady flow of unfolding narrative. This is the first portion in which, as its name suggests, there is a presentation primarily of law, and enumeration of *mitzvot*. Opening to this portion and reading without guidance, the student who had asked the question would feel confirmed in the question's prior assumptions. Sadly, many Jews might also feel a certain coldness in the legal cadence of the text, not much expression given to the language of love as we understand it to be.

As reflected in *Parashat Mishpatim*, Jewish law becomes a practical expression of love in action, law as applied love. The word most commonly used to refer to Jewish law, *halalach*, does not mean law at all, except by association. Derived from the root meaning "to walk or go," *halacha* is a way of going, specific laws as the sign posts along the way. In this portion is one of the frequent proof texts for those who would critique Jewish legalism, "an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth." Regarding a literal interpretation of these words, the rabbis warn, "it should not enter your mind!" The rabbis offer the case of person who has only one eye causing harm to an eye of a person with two eyes. It would not be just to leave the former completely blind. "Eye for an eye" is understood from the very beginning as monetary compensation, as just compensation for damage caused.

Seeking to transform hate to love, bringing close those who were estranged, the rabbis create narrative out of law. Recognizing the human reality that it is easier to help a friend than an enemy, in order that we not give way to a baser response, the Torah commands us, "If you see the donkey of one who hates you lying under its load, you shall not permit yourself to leave it to him; instead you shall let all else go and hasten to his aid." The rabbis tell of two donkey drivers, one of whose animals had collapsed under its load and of the other continuing on his way. Remembering the commandment of the Torah and knowing his responsibility, the one who would gloat turned back to offer assistance. In the awkwardness of that moment, the rabbis imagine the one whose donkey had collapsed thinking to himself, "So and so is my friend and I did not know." The two donkey drivers then entered an inn and ate and drank.

At times love is expressed within the law itself, reminding us of the common humanity that underlies those on both sides of a divide waiting to be mediated; "you shall not oppress a stranger, for you know the soul of a stranger." Appealing to the best within our selves, the law is meant to open our eyes and our heart to see in the other a reflection of my self, the common image of God, and love becomes possible.

Shabbat shalom,  
Rabbi Victor