

## Mishpatim - 2/22/2020

There are moments in history that can be considered pivotal; some are very public, like the Gettysburg Address or the bombing of Hiroshima, while others happen behind closed doors. It's fair to say that most of us have at least one or two that we would love to have witnessed first-hand, just for the experience of it.

It should surprise very few of you that most of my moments are from Jewish history: the signing of Israel's Declaration of Independence; the crossing of the Red Sea; when the rabbis recreated Judaism at Yavneh after the destruction of the Temple. But one moment feels more like a question mark than a strong desire, and we read about it in last week's parsha: God giving Moshe the Ten Commandments at Mount Sinai.

Every time I find myself wishing I had been there, I think about what really happened at Sinai and am quite content not having first-hand memories of it. Separated from their loved ones, without their sense of security, the Israelites' nerves were already on edge without any of the external stimuli happening around them - the thunder, the lightning, the booming voice of God.

In hindsight, the opportunity to experience God's presence sounds awe-inspiring and amazing - in the very best meaning of those emotions. In the moment, though, it was likely the worst definition: vastly unpredictable, terrifying, terrible, traumatizing.

What comes to mind when I think being one of the People of Israel at Mount Sinai is my dog on the 4th of July. From the moment she hears the first sparkler until long past the smoke has cleared from the grand finale, the poor thing is huddled in a corner, shaking with fear at the strange, unpredictable booms and flashing lights in the sky. Where we see beautiful fireworks and hear the accompanying booms deep in our chests, she sees only the end of the world... for the sixth consecutive summer.

We like to think that what our people experienced at Sinai was a once-in-a-lifetime - really once-in-a-universe - spiritual moment. What probably happened was more traumatizing than anything they had experienced before - and bear in mind, this was a group of escaped slaves who experienced 10 plagues, fled their homes at midnight, were chased down by Egyptians on chariots, and walked through an ocean ready to drown at any moment. For a people already in the throes of PTSD, it's hard to imagine the events at Sinai as anything other than deeply traumatic.

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Which is exactly why this week's parsha, Mishpatim, is full of laws - mundane, nitty-gritty, boundary-setting laws.

When people experience trauma of any kind, psychologists tell us that they need three things: **safety, predictability, and control.**

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Right off the bat, this week's parsha starts with the rules about owning slaves - which may seem like a non-sequitur until you recall that the recipients of these laws were freed from slavery merely a couple months earlier. This set of laws is designed to help the Israelites understand that they weren't taken out of Egypt in order to be enslaved again, nor to treat others the way they had been treated there. Even if they were to find themselves working for another Israelite, the boundary of that work agreement is clear - after 6 years of servitude, the slave should go free. Clear expectation setting provided a sense of control that had been sorely lacking for generations.

And while I don't want to go through each of the 53 laws this morning, if you read through the Parsha, I think you'll notice, as I did, how they help to set boundaries and expectations of behavior for the Israelite community. From understanding the penalties of crimes, to defining who qualifies as a person (Judaism's abortion laws come from this week's parsha), keeping kosher, and learning how to celebrate the festivals - this

set of laws are designed to give the flailing, traumatized Israelites a sense of control over their lives and predictability of what they can expect.

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Whether or not we realize it, this same need for **safety, predictability, and control** applies to us just as much. We live in a time when predictability is in short supply, and even as American Jews in the northeast, our sense of safety is challenged on a regular basis. To compensate, we often allow our need to control our world to manifest in the act of trying to control others. We are most certainly not at our best in unpredictable situations - but in attempting to control them, we often act on our emotions rather than looking at things logically. This tends to exacerbate issues rather than resolve them, leading to a downward spiral where we lose even more of our tenuous grasp on events.

Our deeply charged emotions tend not to be about the issue we're reacting but, they're about change, however small, and are coming from a place of fear because as a community, our basic needs of safety, predictability, and control aren't being met to the degree that they need to be.

For our own community, some of that comes from the internal workings of the synagogue. And some of that is entirely external. Our synagogue doors are now locked on a permanent, around the clock, schedule. No amount of smiling faces welcoming us changes the fact that at a very basic level, when we walk into this building, we know that our expectation of safety is different than it was two years ago.

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Trust is hard to build. And it certainly doesn't get built by a rabbi, lay leader, or even God, standing up here saying "trust me" without anything to back it up. Which is exactly why, after the earth-shaking experience of the giving of the Ten Commandments, God handed the story directly over to Moses, who gave the Israelites a sense of security and predictability with concrete laws.

So I want to tell you about two opportunities to begin to cultivate some of that trust.

On March 26th, Shani, our rabbinic intern, is leading an event called "Can We Talk About This? An Evening of Constructive Conversation". Aside from being the wonderful human being that we've been blessed to come to know this year, Shani happens to be a skilled group facilitator, particularly around hard-to-talk-about topics. Unlike the Resetting The

Table programs last year, which focused on Israel, this program is designed to get the group talking about how to talk about the areas where we don't trust each other. Ten years ago, we might have labeled certain topics as "disagreements" - areas where we could profess different view points and then put them aside and enjoy coffee together. Now we're in a place, nationally and locally, where it is no longer about disagreements, but it is a fundamental issue of trust.

This program aims to bring some of that trust back to the relationships between congregants, no matter what the topic is that is causing the discomfort and distrust.

The second opportunity is happening TODAY, right after Kiddush! And it's a far more concrete opportunity. For those of you who have expressed real fears about moving from the disposable silverware that we've been using in the past to washable silverware that we will move to in the future, Wendi is going to walk us through the proper procedures for washing and sanitizing the dishes. This is the procedure that the National Restaurant Association recommends and she's ready to teach it to us. For this very small issue, this learning is akin to today's Torah reading - offering a sense of safety and predictability.

That sense of safety and predictability aren't things that can be rushed. But they also don't need to be delayed intentionally. So if you're one of the people for whom the idea of the silverware is bringing up feelings of anxiety, I invite you to join us in the kitchen towards the end of kiddush to learn more.

And if you're someone who recognizes this fear and anxiety, but it's about other topics that we're grappling with - I encourage you to attend Shani's program, to share your experiences with our leadership (both lay and professional) and to name the emotions / reactions for yourself and the people you're reacting towards. It is amazing how much safer we feel when we begin to name just how unsafe or unpredictable an experience feels.

**Safety, predictability, and control** - three things this week's Torah reading aims to give us, and three things we each need to regain our sense of trust and confidence in community.

Shabbat Shalom.