



Torah Reflections on *Parashat Mishpatim*

Exodus 21:1 – 24:18

27 Shevat 5769

February 21, 2009

The people of Israel are standing at Sinai. They are in an unknown desert that is slowly becoming their temporary "home"; they have been given the manna and learned how to gather and eat it; they have found water to drink; they have fasted and prepared and come to the mountain to meet God. In last week's Torah reading, in a flurry of awesome noise and light, God gave them the Ten Commandments.

Under these circumstances, the Israelites are most likely scared, overwhelmed, uncertain of what will come next. They are living in an unfamiliar place, surviving on unfamiliar nourishment, encountering sights and sounds and experiences that defy all of their senses and previous experiences.

Then, in this week's Torah reading, the people of Israel are told the rules they should live by. *Parashat Mishpatim* details the laws that will govern the lives of the Israelites as they move forward as a people. There are rules about the humane treatment of slaves; rules about appropriate punishments for crimes and injuries to property and people; laws about loans and repayment; rules about rape and marriage; guidelines about charity and about the importance of kindness to the stranger; rules for honest business-dealing and speaking the truth; regulations of Shabbat and of Kashrut; and rules about the major Festivals.

And then, towards the end of the list of laws and regulations, the people are told: "I am sending an angel before you to guard you on the way and to bring you to the place that I have made ready". (Exodus 23: 20)

We can imagine them standing there, listening, and wondering, "How am I possibly going to remember all of this?"

When illness or loss strikes, or when we face a life crisis or transition, we may feel the way the Israelites did standing at Sinai. Our world as we had known it no longer exists and we struggle to maintain some feeling of balance and clarity in the face of an onslaught of new experiences and information. We may feel overwhelmed and fearful, wondering how to make the right decisions. We may resist the change, as the people of Israel did in earlier parts of their journey. We may stand awe-struck and quiet, waiting to see what will come next.

And then, like the Israelites in *Parashat Mishpatim*, we face a new set of rules for our lives. If we are ill, we may receive a list of instructions, of do's and don'ts, of rules and guidelines for eating and exercising, schedules of tests and treatments; we may be bombarded with information on subjects about which we knew little and then asked to make difficult decisions. Well-meaning friends and acquaintances may share their stories and advice, telling us about other treatments and the "one best thing" that helped someone else. At some point, we may feel lost and confused, and wonder how we will possibly

remember it all and find our way out of this maze. We may wonder if life will ever feel normal again.

At times like this, it may help us to remember that even at Sinai, it was clear that the Israelites could not retain and remember all they were told to do. They were not asked to find their way by themselves. They were not left alone to adjust to this new way of life. They were told that an angel would always be with them, guiding the way.

So too, when we feel most overwhelmed and alone, we may do well to look for the "angel", and to remember that God's messengers can take many forms.

The "angel" may be a friend or a family member, a member of our synagogue, someone from the Caring Committee, a nurse or social worker, a rabbi or cantor, or a member of the medical team. The person who proves most helpful may be the one we least expect. Sometimes the angels themselves do not even know that this is the role they are playing in our lives. And as we move through our journeys, we may need, and find, different angels at different times. Sometimes we may even discover that the angel is inside ourselves, in that "still small voice" that tells us when we are on the right path.

How do we recognize the "angel" who will help us find the way forward? They are the ones whose words leave us quiet and comforted, who help us feel confident that we can and will get through the crisis, who are able to shine some light on an otherwise dark and confusing situation. They are the ones who help us through, who guide us on our way, who help us remember all that we need to do and who we are in a changing world.

The Israelites needed an angel at Sinai, just as we do as we move through the challenges of our lives. May we all be blessed with such a presence in our lives.

© Bay Area Jewish Healing Center, Gila Silverman



This Torah Reflection was written by Gila Silverman, a doctoral student in Medical Anthropology at the University of Arizona. The Torah Reflections series is published by the Bay Area Jewish Healing Center (a beneficiary of the Jewish Community Federation of San Francisco, the Peninsula, Marin and Sonoma Counties), an affiliate of the Institute on Aging. More information and healing-oriented resources can be found at www.JewishHealingCenter.org.


