



The Day After

R. Tali Adler – adler@hadar.org

Parashat Mishpatim 5785

Mishpatim, after the narrative path we've experienced so far in Shemot, can feel dizzying.

Until now, Shemot has seemed like a straightforward story: slavery, Exodus, and revelation. It is a narrative that unfolds in a basically clear order, with a clear structure. It is a story that can be read, if not precisely like any other book, at least in much the same way.

Mishpatim changes that; we become unsure of our footing. Having just ended the revelation at Har Sinai we are thrust into a jumble of civil laws, following which we have yet another covenantal scene at Sinai:

שמות כד:ג-ד

³וַיָּבֹא מֹשֶׁה וַיְסַפֵּר לָעָם אֶת כָּל דִּבְרֵי ה' וְאֵת כָּל הַמִּשְׁפָּטִים וַיַּעַן כָּל הָעָם קוֹל אֶחָד וַיֹּאמְרוּ כָּל הַדְּבָרִים אֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר ה' נַעֲשֶׂה: ⁴וַיִּכְתֹּב מֹשֶׁה אֶת כָּל דִּבְרֵי ה' וַיִּשְׁכַּם בַּבֹּקֶר וַיָּבִין מִזִּבְחַת תַּחַת הָהָר וּשְׁתֵּי עָשָׂר מִצֵּבָה לְשִׁנִּים עָשָׂר שְׁבֻטֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל:

Shemot 24:3-4

³Moshe went and repeated to the people all the words of God and all the rules; and all the people answered with one voice, saying, "All the things that God has spoken we will do!"



⁴Moshe then wrote down all the words of God. Early in the morning, he set up an altar at the foot of the mountain, with twelve pillars for the twelve tribes of Israel.

Rashi explains that these chapters are actually out of order, that the laws at the beginning of our *parashah* were given later than the covenantal scene at end of our *parashah*. According to Rashi, these verses in which Moshe reads Sefer ha-Brit (the Book of the Covenant) to the people and ascends to encounter God are actually a flashback which properly belongs in last week's *parashah* before Ma'amad Har Sinai (standing at Sinai).

But what is the Sefer ha-Brit, the book that Moshe reads to the people in this scene at the end of Mishpatim? Rashi explains:

רש"י שם

מִבְּרָאשִׁית וְעַד מִתֵּן תּוֹרָה, וְכָתַב מִצְוֹת שְׁנֵצִטוּ בְּמַרָּה:

Rashi to Shemot 24:4

From “In beginning” up to the account of the Giving of the Torah. And he wrote down the commandments that were given to them in Marah.¹

The content of the Sefer ha-Brit radically underscores the experience of Sinai. A Jew standing at this ceremony would understand that everything in history had always been leading up to this very moment. From the very first minute of creation, through Noah’s flood, Avraham’s journeys, Yitzhak’s near sacrifice, Yosef’s sale, several hundred years of Israelite slavery in Egypt, the freedom that the Jews had so recently experienced—all of that, all of history, had brought them here. A Jew listening to Moshe read from the Sefer ha-Brit would understand history as a singular story leading up to this moment.

¹ I.e., the laws of Shabbat, justice, and honoring one’s parents (Sanhedrin 56b). See also Rashi’s comment to Shemot 24:7.



While this description of the experience of Sinai is powerful, it is also terrifying.

What does one do when they wake up the moment after the culmination of history? What must it have felt like to be a Jew present at Har Sinai, to have experienced the ultimate revelation—and then to go home and need to live life the next day? How does one live knowing that all of the dreams and hopes of everyone who had come before led to one particular moment—and that that moment was yesterday?

Rashi's answer? One falls into chaos.

By saying that the events of chapter 24, the covenantal ceremony, takes place before the revelation at Sinai and the giving of the ten commandments, Rashi creates a dramatic arc: a grand reading of all of history from Sefer ha-Berit, its culmination in the Ten Commandments, and Moshe's disappearance into the heavens, followed by the sin of the Golden Calf.²

In this reading, after the most important day in history, the Jewish people fall off a cliff. They understand that the story they have been living so far has ended, and they are thrown into a free fall. With revelation behind them, the Jewish people do not understand what they are moving towards, and so they fall, unable to do anything but succumb to feelings of emptiness.

The picture Rashi paints of what it means to live after a peak experience is a bleak one. As one frame of experience comes to a close, the Jewish people are unable to enter a new one.

² Rashi also reads the construction of the *mishkan* (tabernacle) as a response to the Golden Calf, which rearranges the order of the *parashiyyot* Terumah, Tetzaveh, and Ki Tissa. See Rashi to Shemot 31:18.



Perhaps it is exactly this cliff that leads the Torah to re-order time, relating its narrative of Sinai with a second chapter, the Sefer ha-Berit, following revelation. The Torah as we have it is an answer to the original drama of the day after Revelation and the resulting chaos of its aftermath. Rather than giving us a transcendent experience that suddenly ends, leaving us in normal, everyday life without a framework to go forward, the Torah delivers revelation in waves, punctuated by coda within coda—part of the story here, part there—broken up into pieces we can absorb. Sinai, as we discover it in the Torah, is not a singular event but an ongoing revelation that we absorb slowly, allowing us to carry it into our new reality.

We often understand our lives as discrete chapters punctuated by singular events that end old stories and begin new ones—and in chronological terms, this is true. There are single moments in our lives when we become graduates, become spouses, become parents. Chronologically we enter these new spaces and realities in the space of a moment—and those moments are important and deserve to be celebrated.

But internally, human beings do not change in the space of a moment. While one goes from being single to married in the short time it takes to conduct a marriage ceremony, the process of becoming a spouse takes much longer—and in some sense, never ends. While one becomes a father as their child is born, absorbing the reality of fatherhood and what it means to live that reality is a process, one that changes over the course of a lifetime.

To reduce the transformative events of our lives to a particular span of minutes is not only to invite paralysis and chaos once the moment is over, it is to ignore the real process of becoming and what we bring to that experience. The culmination of history did not happen at the moment of Har Sinai, but continues to unfold centuries and millennia later as the Jewish people absorb, expand, and live the reality of the Torah in this world. In bringing us into the day-to-day laws of Mishpatim after the revelation at Sinai, the Torah reminds us that it is in the



lived, daily reality of everyday life that Torah is brought into the world. While the singular event at Sinai is over, revelation itself continues as human beings live its laws.

The reworking of the Torah's chronology, its delivery of revelation in waves, reminds us that Torah, in being learned and lived by the Jewish people, is always still becoming—and that, we, through it, are as well.

