

First Things First
Parashat Mishpatim
February 24, 2006

A story, that just happens to be true. My previous synagogue was located on a busy street, much like East-West Highway. Unlike here, however, where the entrance and exits to the parking lot are onto side streets, and you can, in theory, come and go using either street, there, the entrance was from the busy street, and the exit was onto a tiny side street, with a bridge over a small creek to the left of the exit, and a curvy, tree-lined lane to the right. There was a stop sign at the exit from the parking lot.

Came the day when the county, in its wisdom, decided to make improvements on the bridge. I hadn't noticed anything wrong with the bridge, but as I'm not an engineer, I didn't object. During the rather lengthy project, the bridge was, obviously, quite closed. No traffic came or went from the direction to the left of the exit.

So the issue that came up, the question I ask you to consider for a moment, the great existential quandary facing all those leaving that parking lot when the bridge was closed is this. There is no traffic possible from the left. And the exit from the synagogue was only used as an exit, so, essentially, there is now no traffic coming in the other direction either. Do you still... stop at the stop sign?

This is a question I ask, and a story I tell, every year at our Sixth Grade Brunch. It gets at, I think, important questions about values and

rules, tradition and behavior. It opens us up to asking questions, of making changes... and to the possibility of loyalty to a code of behavior even in a case where we can't quite rationalize all the reasons to do so.

I even ask the Sixth Graders and their families what they think I did.

For a while, I must confess, I blew by the stop sign. I didn't stop. Part of it was the thrill of doing something that seemed utterly safe even though it went against convention and, alright, well, law. I was perfectly prepared to argue, in a court if it ever came to it, that the stop sign was superfluous, was not needed, served no current purpose. I was proud of my ability to reason my way through other people's rules, to act as an independent moral agent, to do, in the plain and simple truth of the matter, to do whatever I wanted to do.

But then one day there was a sound from the back seat. It was my then toddler Benjamin, who noticed enough to say "Amen" whenever we went by the synagogue. And I began obeying the stop sign again.

The reasons not to do so were plain enough. So, now, though, were the reasons *to* stop. So I'll stop here for a moment, and turn to you... Why should we still stop at the sign? And what does that have to teach us about Jewish tradition? And this week's Torah portion?

The first answer that changed my behavior back into compliance was the issue of being a role model. I never fully understood our tradition's injunction to make a *siyag l'Torah*, to place a "fence around

the Torah” before this. It is one of the reasons given why chicken is considered meat: someone may walk by your house, look in the window, see you eating dark meat chicken with a glass of milk and *think* it was red meat! *Has v'chalilah!* God forbid they should think such a thing! Better to be safe, and make sure we don't even approach such a dangerous situation! Frankly such reasoning moved me very little. And in fact, following a minority opinion in the Talmud, I, personally, actually do combine poultry and dairy. Although... not at home. Because... well, never mind.

But someone looking at me from the outside... or from the back seat... and learning the wrong lesson, coming to the wrong conclusion about stop signs! *That* suddenly made sense to me. We stop at the stop sign so as not to teach the wrong lesson. To make a fence around the Torah.

And more, perhaps, from this point. We stop at this particular stop sign... because stopping at stop signs is what we are supposed to do.

Which leads to another reason. Habit. We are thinking people. But there are also times we operate, as it were, on automatic. Do we really want to be giving this much conscious thought to every sign we encounter? Or do we want to use some “macros” of the mind, general patterns of behavior. Don't stop here.... and you might... not stop somewhere else.

And besides. Someday that stop sign is going to have meaning again. Sometimes we do things not because of the past, and not because of the present, but because of what will happen in the future.

And then there is this. Who wants to bother going to court to have to explain yourself, if you can avoid it in the first place? Stopping is a rule. It is even a law. Sometimes... we just have to follow the rules. For a culture, for a country, that really goes overboard on the message of freedom, on its emphasis on “do whatever you want,” maybe the experience of following a rule that doesn’t make sense... makes sense.

Maybe even we Reform Jews have forgotten the power of a phrase that comes in this week’s Torah portion: *na’aseh v’nishmah*. “We will do, and we will hear. We will obey. And *then* we’ll understand!” Maybe we’ve had too much of Missouri in our attitude towards Jewish tradition: show me! Prove your worth! Prove you have something to offer me! *Prove* you are worth my precious time! Maybe, instead, we should remember... that we have to prove *our* worth to our tradition, just as much as the other way around.

Loyalty. Rational thinking. Connection to the past. The promise of the future. Behavior modification. Acting because others are watching. Our obligation as role models. Not what you’d expect, over bagels and brunch, and a discussion of planning for a Bar or Bat Mitzvah.

And so we come, at last, to this week's *parashah*. We have come to what is called the Covenant Code, *Parashat Mishpatim*, the collections of laws and rules close on the heels of the theophany at Sinai, the revelation to the people, the giving of the *Aseret Hadibrot*, the Ten Sayings.

“וְאֵלֶּה הַמִּשְׁפָּטִים אֲשֶׁר תָּשִׂים לִפְנֵיהֶם” These are the rules that you shall set before them.” Thus begins the portion of the week.

A teaching, from a Hasidic Master. From Simcha Bunem of Przysucha:

The statutes and judgments legislated for the nations of the world and fixed by sages and people of understanding, those who knew about religion and justice. Those lawgivers actually preceded the statutes and judgments themselves. But it is the other way around with the judgments of Israel, the statutes of the Torah. According to the *Zohar*, the mystical teachings of the *Kabbalah*, the Torah was created an aeon before the creation of the world. As we read in Proverbs: “With judgments a King founds the earth,” and all creation, all of it, is based on the Lord of judgment. And just this is the meaning of “which you shall set before them.” Do not read it *spatially*, but *temporally*: before them in time! Judgment comes before all being, for God gives us the law!

Never mind, for now, the chauvinism inherent in the passage, the way in which our tradition views the Torah as fundamentally, as foundationally different than the law codes of any other people. That is, essentially, a Jewish view of Torah. At least, in comparison to some other approaches, our tradition views other religions as possessing justice and value. So let's... not dwell on that for now.

But here we have an astonishing notion! It is the legend, the myth, if you will, of the primordial Torah. Of a Torah – obviously not a written scroll but some kind of pre-existing notion – that *precedes* creation. In another place we are told God *consults* the Torah in the creation of the world. That Torah is the master plan, the blueprint of the universe.

Here, then, from Louis Ginzberg's collection *Legends of the Jews*: “In the beginning, two thousand years before the heaven and the earth, seven things were created: the Torah, written with black fire on white fire, and lying in the lap of God... When God resolved on the creation of the world, [God] took counsel with the Torah...” Or, as in *Midrash Rabbah*, the Great Midrash, interpreting the verse from Proverbs that “I was with God as an *amon*,” a nursling – “The word *amon* may be read as *umman*, meaning “overall design.” I was in the mind of the Holy One, says the Torah, like the overall design in the mind of a craftsman. Even so the Holy One looked into the Torah as God created the world.” Or,

with the greatest Biblical commentator of all time, Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki, known as Rashi: “The world was created... for the sake of the Torah.”

The Torah predates the universe? What is going on here? What are they trying to say?

This seems utterly strange. But maybe, if it sits with us for a while, it is not such a bizarre notion after all. That there is an experience, and there is something behind experience. That there is an effect, and something behind the effect. A shadow...and that which casts the shadow. A physical world. And a meta-physical one.

Underlying a rule, is the concept of rules. Underlying a law, is the concept of law. And, indeed, underlying the experiences of our lives... are the core values, the real us, the concept we have... of who we are.

How do we get at the question, of who we are? How do we uncover, discover, reveal the core truths about ourselves? It is a question about ultimates. And so we can approach it by asking for what we might be willing to pay...the ultimate price.

So I ask you this night, to stop for a moment, and look at the signs of life around us. Who are you? What is the core of you? What are the things in your life that, if they were changed, you would just...not be you.

And in this life you lead... is there something for which you would be willing to die? Is it your children? Is it your parents? Is it your country? Is it your people? Which people? Under what circumstances? And why? Then let us put thoughts of death away. And remember...what it is that makes our lives worth living.

When I was young, I read the works of a science fiction and fantasy writer named Roger Zelazny. I was surprised to learn, not too long ago, that he lived in this area, and that he was, in fact, a friend of Dan Rozman's father. It's a small world.

When I think of the concept of the primordial Torah, I remember the Amber series. It was Zelazny's concept of a real world, from which many other worlds emanate, of which they are, in a way, reflections. Or shadow worlds.

I remember Picasso. And the cubist paintings. In which all angles, and all perspectives, and all truths try to climb into one frame, all at once. And fail. Because in two dimensions even a cubist painting cannot take the next step, capture the next layer, the one who is outside, and looking in. The painting cannot capture it all.

But in the mind of the painter...

And in the mind of the one who painted the world... all angles meet, in the end of time.

I believe... that what we do in our lives, what we experience, what we taste and touch, how we act...is a reflection, a layer, a shadow of a reality that is really there. That there is a record of our acts that makes up the sum of who we are. That there are threads through time, that what we do today is the nexus point of an eternal and ever flowing connection between yesterday and tomorrow. That the Torah touches all of life. That being Jewish *matters* in this world. And that signs of God are all around us. If we but stop, and pay attention.

Let us remember how we come into this world, and how we leave it. Reflections of... the ones who used to be. A legacy for the ones we leave behind.

Rabbi Nachman said: *Kol HaOlam Kulo, Gesher Tzar Me'od*. The whole entire world... is a very narrow bridge. *V'ha Ikkar... Lo L'facheid K'lal*. The most important thing... is not to be afraid.

Shabbat Shalom.