

“Mitzvot” and “Mishpatim” - A Program for National Spiritual Growth

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The first two sections of the parshah set up a dichotomy between “mitzvot” and “mishpatim”. The parshah begins by stating that if we keep the mishpatim, God will bless the Jewish state with uncanny success. This includes political, military, and agricultural achievements that outstrip other nations. The second section (starting at 8:1) states keeping God’s “mitzvah” enables us to inherit Eretz Yisrael in the first place. We are reminded of the daily need for collecting man in the desert. This was an educational regimen to teach us that God, and not our own efforts, ultimately provide for our needs. In Eretz Yisrael, where we are sustained through agriculture, this lesson is not apparent.

What do the different terms “mitzvah” and “mishpatim” denote? Why does keeping mitzvot enable us to inherit Eretz Yisrael, while keeping the mishpatim leads specifically to international success?

Malbim (8:1) explains that the purpose of the mitzvot is to bring Bnei Yisrael to the highest levels of moral and spiritual actualization. Eretz Yisrael is part of this process, and, therefore, the reason Bnei Yisrael merit to live there is in order to fully realize the growth which the mitzvot engender. We may note that this approach explains why the Torah mentions the man at this point. The daily collection of the man inculcated a sense of God’s constant provision of needs and an ability on Bnei Yisrael’s part to trust Him. Similarly, the other mitzvot are designed to educate towards other aspects of ethical-spiritual perfection.

The transformation elicited by the mitzvot does not occur overnight. What happens when forces within Bnei Yisrael threaten to undermine mitzvah observance and cut off the process of growth? According to Ramban (7:12) this is the purpose of the “mishpatim”. These judiciary laws of the Torah counteract three main threats: sinning in defiance of God, intellectual attacks on commitment to God, and aggression which threatens social order. Putting together the Ramban and the Malbim we may say that the “mishpatim” are the safeguards which ensure that the “mitzvot” have their full transformative effect on Bnei Yisrael.

We can now explain why specifically the mishpatim evoke the brachah of international renown. Ramban cites approvingly the interpretation of Ibn Ezra, that the word ekev means a result which occurs at the end of a long process. In other words, our parshah is stating that if we safeguard our observance of mitzvot by means of the mishpatim, we will eventually transform into a nation which God will proudly put on display. This process may well require the entire course of Jewish history.

The parshah teaches us important lessons about our national identity and mission. We merit to live in Eretz Yisrael because of our commitment to the growth process encoded in the mitzvot. Ultimately though this achievement is not for ourselves, but in order to serve as an example of ethical-spiritual living to the nations of the world.

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