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משפטים

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Our Moral and Spiritual Obligation

By Danny Missaghi

In this week's פרשה of משפטים, the Jewish people receive a taste of their destiny as a people chosen to be an "אור גוים", a light unto the nations (ישעיה מב:ו). In this week's פרשה ה', ה' liberally shares several fundamental laws and statutes, whose purpose is to teach us how to be a moral and just nation. These laws discuss what we should do if we get into fights, how to reprimand thieves, how we should make sure to clean up anything we made that could potentially cause harm to others, and even what we should do if our oxen, animals which we don't even have direct control over, harm others or cause them monetary damage. The fact that this is said here, in פרשת משפטים, is particularly noteworthy.

Later on in the פרשה, the Jews accept all of the laws in the תורה through their words of "נעשה ונשמע". This is a very spiritual event, with the Jews having solidified the fact that ה' is their leader, and that they are His people. Although at this point, the Jews are only thinking about worshipping ה' and performing מצוות בין אדם למקום, they must also know that מצוות בין אדם לחברו and being moral people are of equal importance to מצוות בין אדם למקום. Before we accept the תורה in its entirety, we must learn to be a nation which is worthy of receiving it: We must be a moral nation, filled with good people who are good to one another. This is why we learn all of these laws of morality now. We have a principle in Judaism of "דרך ארץ קדמה לתורה", that being kind to one another supersedes the תורה. This is emphasized right now, where ה' wants to teach the Jews that they must be moral people before they can receive the תורה.

Particularly worth noting is the elevated focus on the rights and wellbeing of the weakest members of society -- the widow, the orphan and the stranger, or convert. The reason that the תורה gives for us not oppressing a stranger is that we too were strangers when we were enslaved in Egypt. This reasoning can be expanded to the other two groups of people as well. In Egypt, we were part of the lowest class in society, the slaves. Now, we shouldn't oppress the weakest people of society, as that would make us just as bad as the Egyptians who enslaved us. The תורה is again teaching us how to be moral before the Jews accept the תורה in order to show that to be a nation worthy of the תורה, we must also be a moral nation.

This פרשה serves as a reminder of the guiding principles we need to work towards in creating a society that is best for everyone, not just those with the loudest voices. We are charged to have a heightened level of awareness and commitment to making sure that every person -- regardless of their wealth, power or background -- is provided for and protected in our gentle and compassionate society. As the Jewish people, we bear a great burden. We must be an "אור לגוים", a light unto the nations. In order to do this, we must strive to be the best people we can, and remember that Judaism isn't only about worshipping ה'. It's also about being the best people that we can be.

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The Power of a Commitment

By Ephraim Fischer

I would like to start this דבר תורה with a story about a young boy named נפתלי. Now, נפתלי was never the most diligent student, and he could never concentrate. He would never listen to his רבנים, and he just didn't want to learn. One day, after he got home, he overheard a conversation between his parents. His father was telling his mother that he had spoken with נפתלי's teacher, who had remarked that נפתלי would never amount to anything with regards to his תורה study. His father's plan was to enroll נפתלי as an apprentice shoemaker after his מצווה בר, and to stop his תורה study altogether. נפתלי was so surprised by this that he burst into the room, and told his father, "I'm sorry that I have ignored my studies for this long! I promise that from this day forward, I will apply myself in my תורה studies. Just please give me one more chance!". His parents gave him one more chance, and from that day forward, נפתלי made a commitment to apply himself to תורה study with rigor. This boy grew up to be הרב נפתלי צבי יהודה ברלין, נצי"ב מוואלאזשין. He was one of the greatest רבנים of his time and has had a great influence on Judaism. He led the וואלזשין ישיבה, teaching over ten thousand students in his lifetime. He also wrote the העמק דבר, a very influential תורה commentary. Had נפתלי never made this commitment, he would have never grown to be a רב of this level.

In this week's פרשה, we make a commitment which changes our nation forever. When משה presented the Torah to us, we said "נעשה ונשמע", we will do, and we will listen. This commitment by us to uphold the תורה forever transformed us into the people that we are today. There were many transformations that came along with this commitment, of which I will focus on three of them.

One of the transformations that occurred was that at this point, we were transformed from the descendants of Yaakov into the Jewish people. While by last week's פרשה, הר סיני, it is said that "פסקה זוהמתן", that the filth which we got when חוה ate from the עץ הדעת was removed from us (שבת קמ"א), we were still not a Jewish people. When we said נעשה ונשמע, משה sprinkled the blood of קרבנות onto us. The ילקוט מעם לועז says that this sprinkling of blood signified us finishing our process of conversion, and now, we were bonafide Jews. We had already gotten a ברית מילה before leaving Egypt, we had gone to a מקווה when preparing for תורה, מתן, and now, we are completing our final step of becoming a Jewish people, after accepting all the laws of the תורה upon ourselves.

Another transformation which we experience is that when we said נעשה ונשמע, we were changed from an ordinary nation to one bearing the crown of HaShem. The גמרא (שבת פ"ח א) states that when we said נעשה ונשמע, six hundred thousand angels came down, and put two crowns onto each member of the Jewish people. One crown corresponding to נעשה, and one crown corresponding to נשמע. When we accepted the תורה onto ourselves, we were accepting much more than just the תורה: We were accepting 'ה as our leader. This point is further emphasized by the מלאך המות, who brings down that when we said נעשה ונשמע, 'ה said to the מלאך המות, "You have jurisdiction over all other nations besides for this nation, because this nation is the nation of my children". This is perhaps the biggest transformation, as we receive our role in this world as 'ה's chosen nation.

There were not only physical transformations which we undertook with this commitment. We also experienced the personal transformation of being able to put all of our trust into 'ה. The גמרא (שבת פ"ח א-ב) brings down a story in which a Sadducee called the Jews "עַמָּא פְּזִיזָא", an impulsive nation, because they said that they would keep the Torah without reading it first. The Sadducee said that maybe they should've read the תורה, and then, if the laws are feasible, they should've said that they'd keep it! This story may not be as bad as it seems. In my opinion, being called an impulsive nation could not be more of a compliment. It shows how at this point in time, we were willing to put our full trust in 'ה. We were not so impulsive as we were ready to fulfill our role as 'ה's chosen nation, and we were prepared to put our full trust in 'ה to fulfill this role.

All of these transformations show the power that a single commitment can have. When the Jews made this commitment, they were intending to come closer to 'ה, and it turned us into 'ה's chosen people. We too can make these commitments to completely transform our lives and come closer to 'ה. May we all make commitments to better ourselves, and through these may we come closer to 'ה.