



RABBI JUDAH

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Dedicated L'Iluys Nishmas HaChaver
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An *Eitzah*

Rebbe Chaim of Tzanz, the Divrei Chaim, zy'a, was known for his greatness in Torah, righteousness, and generosity. His *ahavas Yisrael*, kindness and compassion was legendary.

Once, one Erev Shabbos, a poor woman knocked on the door of the Divrei Chaim. She was beside herself with worry and agony, and begged for financial assistance to buy basic necessities for Shabbos. The Rebbe was surprised, as he knew the woman to be a hard working long-time business owner. "Don't you have a vegetable stall in the marketplace?" he asked, "Did something happen?"

The woman explained that there were some people in town who spread a rumor that her potatoes were of inferior quality and were not fit to be grated for kugel, nor on the level to be included in one's Shabbos cholent. As a result she had not sold any potatoes all week, and had no money to make Shabbos for her family.

The Divrei Chaim sat quietly for a few moments and then said, "I have an *eitzah*.

I think I have a solution...." The Rebbe rose from his place and made his way to the marketplace with the woman, and walked directly to her potato stand. Word spread quickly that the Divrei Chaim was in the marketplace, and the townsfolk, unaccustomed to seeing the Rebbe in the streets of the *shuk*, flocked to find out what was happening. Why would their beloved Rebbe lower himself to tread the alleyways of the marketplace? It was surely beneath his honor...

"*Teiyreh yiden*, sweet Jews!" the Rebbe called out, "I've come here today to have the *zechus* of purchasing the greatest potatoes in the world; they are delicious, and of the highest quality, in taste — and in their supernal root. Who would like the great merit of buying some of them as well?"

Predictably, the potatoes were sold out in minutes, with people offering to pay up to ten times the regular price. If these were the preferred *lichvod Shabbos kartufle* of the Divrei Chaim, everyone in the city wanted to have them too!

The woman made more money that day than she had all season. "You see," said the Divrei Chaim, "your potatoes were of good quality; it is just that the townspeople didn't realize it until today."

Following the dramatic events of Matan Torah, our sedra turns to introduce an extensive series of civil laws that form the backbone of a moral and ethical religious society.

Veileh ha-mishpatim... “And these are the ordinances that you shall set before them. Should you buy an *eved Ivri*, a Hebrew servant, he shall work for six years, and in the seventh year, he shall go out to freedom without charge” (*Shemos*, 21:1-2). Rashi explains that the focus of this first law highlights the process of acquiring the service of one whom the court has sentenced to servitude as a result of his crimes, as a way to pay back his theft and cover his debt.

The great *baal mussar*, *talmid chacham* and pedagogue, Reb Simcha Zissel Ziv Broide zt'l, the Alter of Kelm, was one of the primary students of Rav Yisrael Salanter. He asked a penetrating question. The Torah speaks in honorable, positive terms. Why do the halachos of *bein adam l'chaveiro* begin in such a shameful fashion? Why should the civil laws begin with the lowly subject of a Jew who steals or commits a crime, an *aveirah*, that undermines the moral fabric of a society? After the glorious experience at Mount Sinai, in which the Jewish People together were initiated into the greatest Divine revelation in world history, and attained an unimaginably high spiritual state — might it not be more appropriate to begin *Mishpatim*, a parsha of over fifty mitzvos, on a more positive note?

The Alter of Kelm answered that these

civil laws are actually beyond ‘do’s and don’ts’, crimes and punishments. Hashem is communicating with each of us through Torah. *Banim atem laHashem*, “You are all children to Hashem”; if the *Ribbono shel Olam* has a beloved child who falls into mistakes, steals something or damages the body or property of another, He sees a Jew who is struggling, who has a serious debt to repay and needs assistance. Therefore, His Torah reveals processes of rehabilitating his children and reconciling them into community life. A dire personal challenge demands immediate action, even if it is unpleasant. Hashem is showing us how to get busy working out a solution, finding an *eitzah* to help a challenged Jew get his life back on track.

Rebbe Avraham Ibn Ezra teaches that our sedra and the corpus of Torah law begins with the *eved Ivri* because this represents the weakest sector of our society, and we must ensure that we are aware of and sensitive to the plight of those who are most vulnerable.

After the awe-inspiring ‘fireworks’ of Mount Sinai, the Torah guides us to where the rubber hits the road, and where ‘spiritual initiation’ meets the tests of life in this world: taking responsibility to do whatever is necessary to ensure the wellbeing of each of Hashem’s children.

Let us renew our commitment to being sensitive to the needs of our friends and neighbors, and do our utmost to find an *eitzah* regarding any ‘potatoes’ that we are collectively having trouble selling. ■