



BADERECH

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Mishpatim: First Things First

The beloved Rebbe Zusha of Anipoli was a *tzadik* of great spiritual *ehrlichkeit* and sensitivity. Though he and his family lived in constant poverty, they constantly sought opportunities to assist others generously. Years had gone by since the last time the Rebbetzin had purchased anything for herself, so in advance of Yom Tov, Reb Zusha gathered *kopek* after *kopek*, finally collecting enough funds in order to purchase material for the construction of a new dress for his Rebbetzin.

A few days later, word was sent that the dress was ready and waiting at the tailor's shop. The Rebbetzin was thrilled. However, when she returned from the tailor, she appeared crestfallen. "What's the matter?" asked Reb Zusha. "Are you not pleased with the new dress?"

The Rebbetzin related the story: As the

tailor presented her with the finished garment, he seemed dejected, and let out an audible *krechitz*, a deep sigh. When she asked him what the cause of his *tzara* was, the tailor explained that when his future son-in-law had seen him toiling over the dress, he assumed it was for his bride-to-be. The poor tailor didn't have the heart to tell his daughter's *chatan* that it wasn't, and he was distressed over his ability to provide a dress. "So I took the dress" smiled the Rebbetzin, shyly, "and gave it to the tailor as a gift for the kallah. I'm truly happy that we could bring joy to a chosson and kallah... but now, I confess, I'm a bit disappointed that I won't have a dress for Yom Tov."

Reb Zusha thought for a moment and asked, "Tell me, my dear, did you pay the tailor for his work?"

"Pay him? I gave him the material you bought and gave them the whole dress as a gift!"

Reb Zusha explained to his wife: "My dear, all week long, this struggling tailor has been working for us, investing time and effort on *your* dress. He had no intention that it would be for his daughter. And no doubt he was counting on the *parnassah* once the job was finished; who knows what he needed that money for? What is this poor fellow going to do now? It's truly beautiful and generous that you gave your dress to his daughter... but I think we need to pay for his hard work, too..."

The Rebbetzin understood her husband's point, and Reb Zusha set out to find a way to compensate the tailor for his efforts.

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Bearing more than fifty mitzvos, our *sedra* launches a detailed system of interpersonal laws aimed at cultivating a just and compassionate society. In *Mishpatim*, the Torah lays the framework for our obligations toward employees, our civil regulations and labor laws, corporate ethics, and standards of *ehrlichkeit* in dealings with clients. This halachic expo forms the basis of related *mitzvos* throughout the Torah. For example...

“You shall not withhold the wages of a poor or destitute hired worker, (whether they are) your brothers or strangers who are in your land, within your cities. You shall give him his wage on his day and not let the sun set over it — for he is poor, and he risks his life for it — so that he should not cry out to Hashem against you, lest there should be sin upon you” (*Devarim*, 24:14-15)

The intricate *halachos* that flow from such sources in *Mishpatim* aim to ensure fair treatment and *kavod* for every member of our community and to protect the dignity and wellbeing of every member in our communal ecosystem. This includes protecting any unsavory characters who have degraded themselves and made unfortunate life choices, causing damage to themselves and others due to negligence or immorality, even murderers and thieves, *rachmana l'tzlan*.

Our *sedra* also includes a variety of laws that are *bein adam laMakom*, belonging to

the intimate relationship between a person and Hashem; for example, laws relating to the Kashrus of food. Torah issues a directive to not eat *neveilos* and *treifos*, flesh from wounded animals. The ‘reason’ given is Hashem desires that *ל' תרין קדש אנשי*, “you shall be people of holiness to Me” (22:30).

Rebbe Menachem Mendel of Kotzk, zy'a, shared a novel interpretation of Hashem's command, expanding the principle beyond the dietary laws. Before the Torah instructs us to “be holy”, we are commanded to be “people” — the term *anshei* precedes the descriptive *kedesh*. As the Kotzker said, *Kodem a mench un nach dem heilig*, “First be a true human being, and only then strive for holiness.”

From properly treating employees and merchants and protecting the weakest elements of our society, to *halchos* relating to our personal relationship with Hashem, the goal and path outlined in this week's parsha, it can be argued, is *mentchlichkeit*.

May we take a lesson from Reb Zusha and live the lessons of our *sedra* as *anshei kodesh*, true *erliche mentchen*, holy to Hashem — and holy toward one another. ■

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