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Rabbi Steven Saks

*Parashat HaShavuah Series*

**Parashat Mishpatim**

Often, an original book or movie is better than the sequel. Last year (on TV), I caught the end of *Beverly Hills Cop*, starring Eddie Murphy. I had not seen it in years, and I had forgotten how funny a movie it is. It is genuinely a good comedy. However, not too many people will say the same of *Beverly Hills Cop Two*...and *Beverly Hills Cop Three* bombed.

Does the Torah follow the same pattern as the movies? *Parashat Yitro*, which precedes *Parashat Mishpatim*, is certainly an exciting *Parasha*. Yitro, the Midianite priest and father-in-law of Moses, joined the Hebrews after he heard that God had saved them. Yitro brings his daughter Zipporah and grandchildren, thus reuniting Moses with his wife and children.

The excitement continues with the revelation at Sinai. After three days of preparation, the children of Israel were ready to receive the Torah. As the Israelites approached the mountain, a heavy cloud settled over it, along with thunder, lightning, and the sound of the Shofar. The mountain was smoking like a furnace as God descended upon it in fire. Sinai trembled. And then the Ten Commandments were revealed.

One would expect an exciting cliffhanger to ensue. However, if you were expecting an exciting sequel, you might very well be disappointed in *Parashat Mishpatim*. The *Parasha* begins by explaining civil law. If there is one class law students complain about, it is civil procedure – it is boring. *Mishpatim* even sounds boring; it means ordinances.

The question is obvious. Why does *Mishpatim* follow *Yitro*? Rashi explains that *Mishpatim* is indeed a continuation of *Yitro*. The first word of *Mishpatim* is וְאֵלֶּה – “and these.” The “and” in front of “these” indicates that the ideas promulgated in *Yitro* continue in *Mishpatim*.

But do they really? The Ten Commandments (stated in *Yitro*) present lofty ideas. For instance, the fourth commandment commands us to remember the Shabbat, and introduces the idea of sanctified time. Until this day, we have Shabbat. The Christians moved their Sabbath but still retain it, and Friday is the Muslim’s holy day. To a large extent, the Ten Commandments created the western civilization's moral framework. Again and again debates over the Ten Commandments appear. (Should they be posted in schools or courtrooms? I do not wish to address that question now.)

How is *Mishpatim* a continuation of *Yitro*? *Mishpatim* begins by enacting ordinances

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*Rabbi Saks is rabbi of Adas Kodesch Shel Emeth in Wilmington, Delaware.*

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protecting the Hebrew slave. The slave has rights! Indeed, *Mishpatim* is a continuation of *Yitro* as Rashi explains: the ordinances in *Mishpatim* are also from Sinai and are of equal importance.

With the help of our “film critic” Rashi, the message becomes clear. *Mishpatim* is juxtaposed to the Ten Commandments to make it clear that the manner in which we treat our fellow human beings, even a lowly slave, is just as important as our observance of Shabbat. *Bava Kamma* 30a explains that if one wants to be pious, he should be scrupulous in the matters of civil law and torts, for in Judaism the concept of the “sanctuary” is in the courtroom as well as the Temple. By treating our fellow human beings with respect, we perform a tremendous *Kiddush Hashem*.

*Shabbat Shalom!*

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