

## Parshas Mispatim

This week's *parsha*, *Mishpatim*, is devoted to the implementation of justice and financial law. It begins with the words, "And these are the laws" to indicate that they are a continuation from the previous discussion. When *Hashem* gave *Moshe Rabeinu* the *Torah* at Sinai, it included these laws. This means that although our nation has laws that are similar in many ways to the natural law that is found in other nations' legal codes, ours is divine in origin.

Rav Shmshon Refoel Hirsch extends this idea further. He notes that the first laws that are dealt with in this discussion are the laws of the indentured Jewish servant, both male and female. A Jewish man can either sell himself into servitude because of his dire financial situation, or he can be sold by the court if he committed a theft and does not have the money to pay. The *Torah* teaches the master that he must release him on time, treat him and his family with respect, and the master must provide for them. In spite of these benefits, the servant is discouraged from renewing his bond with his master by choosing to remain beyond his original term of bondage. The *Torah's* laws are designed to support his rehabilitation and restoration to society as an autonomous and self-sustaining individual.

In the case of the indentured girl, she can only become indentured if her father sells her out of desperation because he cannot provide for her and protect her. She can only be sold for the remaining years of her childhood. When she reaches adolescence, the master who had assumed responsibility for her up to this point now faces a choice. He can either release her back to family or he can marry her or marry her to his son. If he takes this approach, she will become a full-fledged member of the family that took her in. She will now be the wife or daughter-in-law of her former master with all of the rights of a Jewish wife. Her introduction into the family by way of bondage may not diminish those rights in any way.

While both of these scenarios are not practiced today, there is a very important message about how a just society is built. The measure of a society is how it treats its most vulnerable members. While the judicial system has to keep society free of crime and protect property and individual rights, the ultimate measure of its justice is its ability to protect the vulnerable that have no social or economic standing.

This lesson is for all times. We are obligated to give a voice to those who don't have one and to champion families and individuals who struggle cognitively, emotionally, socially and financially. It is a challenge since leadership of communities is typically in the hands of the haves, not the have nots, and it is easy to demonize those who think and act differently than ourselves. It is our finest hour when we stand at their side and treat them with respect and fairness no matter how difficult that may be.

