

Spirituality and Reality: Thoughts on Parashat Mishpatim, February 9, 2013

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By

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In last week's Parasha, Yitro, we read the magnificent description of the Revelation of God at Mount Sinai. This was the loftiest moment in the history of the people of Israel—and in the history of humanity as a whole—when God directly conveyed the “Ten Commandments” as the foundation of religious and ethical life.

This week we read Mishpatim, which seems so mundane by contrast with Yitro. Mishpatim focuses on property rights, issues in business law, damages and restitution. These practical laws are interspersed with verses instructing us to be concerned for the welfare of the poor, widow and orphan; to be compassionate, since we ourselves were slaves in Egypt and should have learned from that experience to be sympathetic to those who suffer.

The Torah juxtaposes the lofty spiritual experience of Revelation with the practical concerns of daily life. It connects grand religious insights with laws governing everyday business life. The lesson: life as a whole is to be imbued with spirituality. Interpersonal relationships are significant aspects of a spiritual worldview and way of life.

These essential lessons were central to the teachings of one of the great rabbinic figures of American Jewry during the latter nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: Dr. Henry Pereira Mendes. Dr. Mendes, who served Congregation Shearith Israel in New York from 1877-1937, was a dynamic communal leader, teacher, and author. He was founder and first president of the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America. He was among the founders of various institutions including the New York Board of Jewish Ministers (now known as New York Board of Rabbis), the Jewish Theological Seminary (originally an Orthodox institution), Lexington School for the Deaf, and Montefiore Hospital.

Dr. Mendes emphasized the need for religion to be a steady and constant force in one's life. True religion is expressed not merely in ceremonials, but in our conduct in all aspects of our daily lives. In his book, “Jewish Daily Life Ethically Presented,”

(published in 1917), Dr. Mendes wrote that “our religion requires threefold work from us: we must work for our own happiness, we must work for the happiness of the world we live in, and we must work for the glory of God” (p. 57). He continued: “Our daily work, no matter how important or menial, if we perform it conscientiously, becomes equivalent to an act of worship. It therefore means setting God before us as the One we desire to please by the faithful discharge of our daily duties. This kind of recognition of good faith, honesty and honor means religion. Conscientiousness is religion. We must therefore do our work conscientiously. We should derive spiritual happiness out of labor by recognizing that God consecrates labor” (p. 59).

In his interpretations of the Ten Commandments (in his book “The Jewish Religion Ethically Presented” published originally in 1895, and in a revised edition in 1912), Dr. Mendes elaborated on the biblical text, offering moral lessons by which to govern one’s life. For example, in commenting on the commandment not to take God’s name in vain, he remarks: “We take His name in vain, or to no purpose, if we speak of God being good, just, merciful etc., without trying ourselves to be good, just, merciful, etc....We take or assume His name in vain when we call ourselves by His name and say we are His children or His people, while for our convenience or ease we neglect religious duties which He has commanded us” (1912 edition, pp. 59-60).

In discussing the commandment forbidding murder, Dr. Mendes noted that “we may not kill a man’s good name or reputation, nor attack his honor....We may not kill a man’s business....Respect for human life carries with it respect for anyone’s livelihood. We may not make it hard for others to live by reason of our own greed” (pp. 65-66).

Dr. Mendes often expressed his philosophy in short sentences and epigrams. A number of these were collected by Rabbi Dr. David de Sola Pool in his short biography of Dr. Mendes. The following are a few examples of Dr. Mendes’ wit and wisdom.

In too many homes, religion is a farce not a force.

The three greatest R’s: Reverence, Righteousness and Responsibility.

Democracy is the ideal form of government, but it needs ideal citizens.

Let us have less fault-finding and more fault-mending.

Speak to the young: but first to the old.

Peace for the world at last; and the realization of reverence for God by all men. These are the essentials for human happiness. Zionism stands for them.

In 1911, Dr. Mendes had suffered a very serious illness. Upon his recovery, he delivered a moving sermon in which he called on himself and his congregation to strive more mightily to serve God with righteousness. He concluded the sermon with words of thoughtfulness and profound inspiration: "Let us all try to prove our gratitude to God by doing His will. Then, come sorrow, come trial, come defeat, come death itself, the God who alone knows the human heart, who alone can read the inmost soul, shall judge whether you and I have labored in vain, whether you and I have spent our strength for naught, and in vain,--for surely our judgment shall be with the Lord and our work shall be before our God."

[Angel for Shabbat](#)