

A Thinking Judaism--Thoughts on Parashat Mishpatim, February 21, 2009

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This week's Torah portion begins with God commanding Moses : "And these are the ordinances that you shall set before them." Rashi comments that God instructed Moses not to teach the Israelites by rote, but to explain the reasons for the laws. If the people had the opportunity to study the reasons behind the laws, they would more likely internalize and fulfill them.

Rashi's comments relate to "mishpatim", those ordinances that are apparent to reason and common sense. But what about "hukkim", laws whose reasons are not readily apparent? Was Moses expected to offer reasons and explanations for these ceremonial, ritual laws? Or was he to state the commandments and have the Israelites obey them even if they did not understand the underlying reasons for them?

In his "Guide for the Perplexed," Rambam devoted serious discussion to the reasons for mitzvot. He believed that since God is all-wise, all of the mitzvot contain divine wisdom. God's commandments aim at perfecting us, inculcating proper beliefs, improving society. God would not issue commands in an arbitrary, irrational manner. Rambam writes disparagingly of those who view the Torah in an obscurantist way: "There is a group of human beings who consider it a grievous thing that causes should be given for any law; what would please them most is that the intellect would not find a meaning for the commandments and prohibitions (book 3, chapter 31)." He refers to the sickness in the souls of such people, who prefer to observe commandments blindly rather than to imagine that God had reasons for giving these commandments. Rambam writes: "Every commandment from among these 613 commandments exists either with a view to communicating a correct opinion, or to putting an end to an unhealthy opinion, or to communicating a rule of justice, or to warding off an injustice, or to endowing men with a noble moral quality, or to warning them against an evil moral quality."

According to Rambam's approach, we need to study God's commandments with a view of trying to understand the divine wisdom within them. While we may not be able to penetrate to God's own wisdom, we will become better and more religious

people by engaging in intellectual analysis and inquiry.

Rambam rejects the obscurantist approach that teaches blind obedience and authoritarianism. He fosters a philosophic approach that teaches us to think, to ask, to try to find answers. Certainly, we are obligated to observe the mitzvot whether or not we ultimately understand the reasons for them; but we should study and strive and struggle to reach as deep a level of understanding as possible. This is at the root of our freedom and dignity as religious human beings.

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