Eye for an Eye?: Thoughts on Parashat Mishpatim

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Mishpatim

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This week's Torah portion includes the "eye for an eye" rule, retribution for damages one has caused another. Our rabbis long understood this phrase to refer to monetary compensation. Taking out the offender's eye would have no practical value to the injured party, and would certainly not restore the losses caused by injury to his/her own eye.

The verse used this language to indicate that the assessment of compensation must be based on the particular eye that had been damaged. The half blind eye of an elderly person has a different financial value from the eye of a thirty year old surgeon. The Torah rejects compensation of a flat payment per eye, requiring the judges to make a careful evaluation of the actual loss and potential loss suffered by the victim.

The idea of payment in proper measure applies not merely to monetary matters, but to life in general. The Mishna (Sotah 1:7) teaches that "bemidah she-adam moded kakh mododim lo," i.e. a person will be subject to the same standard of judgment that he/she uses in judging others. The Almighty will exact retribution in consonance with one's own standards of judgment. If a person willfully harms another, the Heavenly court will exact payment. If a person sees injustice but looks aside, the Heavenly court will look aside when passing judgment on his/her soul. If one has betrayed the trust of others, one can expect exact retribution when facing Divine justice. There are no free rides: cruelty, injustice, vindictiveness and betrayal will all be repaid, measure for measure.

On the other hand, if a person is righteous and compassionate, he/she will be repaid measure for measure. The great Hassidic master, Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of

Berdichev, was famous for finding virtue and merit in everyone, even those who were unworthy of such kindness. He is said to have prayed to the Almighty: “Oh merciful Father, please have mercy on me as I have had mercy on my fellow human beings; please show me compassion as I have shown compassion to all.”

The Jerusalem Talmud (end of the tractate Peah) relates that a blind man came to town and the prominent sage, Rabbi Eliezer, sat next to him. When the community saw that Rabbi Eliezer showed such honor on the blind man, people assumed that the visitor must be a person of importance. They provided generous sustenance to him. The blind man inquired why he had merited such wonderful care. He was told that Rabbi Eliezer had sat next to him and this caused the public to hold the visitor in high esteem. The blind man then offered a blessing to Rabbi Eliezer: “You have shown compassion to one who is seen but who does not see. May the One who sees and is not seen receive your prayers and shower compassion on you.”

We are each challenged to recognize that we will be judged and treated by the same standards with which we conduct our lives. May we be worthy to offer this prayer: “May the One who sees and is not seen receive our prayers and shower compassion on us.”

Angel for Shabbat