A Thinking Judaism: Thoughts for Parashat Mishpatim

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Mishpatim

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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 mitzvoth. He believed that since God is all-wise, all of the mitzvoth 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: "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 insists: "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."

Rambam was displeased with those who thought that the Torah's teachings should be accepted blindly and unthinkingly. This tendency of mind leads inexorably to a superficial view of religion, even to superstition. A mind that is trained to accept information without analyzing and questioning it, is a mind that can be controlled by demagogues.

Rabbi Hayyim Hirschensohn, an important rabbinic figure of the early 20th century, offered a fascinating interpretation as to why the Torah often uses the word “leimor” e.g. and God spoke to Moses “leimor” (saying). The Torah added this word to indicate that God did not want the words of Torah to be given in an absolute fixed form, but rather to be subject to discussion and explanation. The word "leimor" is, in a sense, an invitation to participate in the analysis of the text. Instead of demanding blind obedience, God invited all students of Torah to use their rational faculties to try to determine truth.

A thinking Judaism is an intellectual and spiritual adventure that elevates us as Jews and as human beings.

Angel for Shabbat