A Divine Reminder: Thoughts for Parashat Mishpatim

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Mishpatim

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The Kotzker Rebbe offered an imaginative scene relating to the Revelation at Mt. Sinai. While all the Israelites gathered to receive God's words, a group of elitists started to leave in the middle of the event. They reasoned: why did we bother to come to hear that we are not allowed to murder or steal or commit adultery? We knew these things on our own.

But then the Almighty told them to return to the site of the Revelation. He told them that they, too, needed to hear these commandments. Why? Because they sometimes have murder, theft and adultery in their hearts! They, too, need to hear directly from God that these actions are reprehensible. They, too, need a powerful reminder to live moral, upright lives.

The Torah portion last week reported on the Revelation at Sinai and the receiving of the Ten Commandments. This week's parasha focuses on ethical business dealings and practical, everyday moral behavior. Here, too, people might think: why do I need to read these passages relating to damages, loans, business dealings? We could figure these things out on our own!

But, as the Kotzker Rebbe suggested, everyone needs to be reminded of the Divine commandments relating to upright and honest dealings. Why? Because people sometimes have tendencies that lead to dishonesty and immoral behavior. The Torah gives a powerful reminder to rise above negative tendencies, and to live honest lives.

Moral conflicts arise in life. Should we make a profitable deal, even if it entails dishonesty? Should we try to cause damage to someone we dislike, even if that would entail transgression of basic Torah laws? People have a way of justifying their behavior, even when that behavior is destructive, dishonest, immoral.

In his play, “All My Sons,” Arthur Miller portrays a family coping with a deep secret.

The head of the family, Joe Keller, was a manufacturer of engines for airplanes. During World War II, the government needed war materiel and Keller’s business boomed. In the midst of heavy production, a batch of engines came out with cracks. These cracks were covered up superficially, and the engines were sold to the government. The defective engines led to the deaths of 21 pilots. When the government investigated the matter, Keller managed to get exonerated, shifting the entire blame on to his partner—who was imprisoned. Keller and family continued to live well; Keller’s son Chris totally believed in the innocence of his father.

But the ugly truth could not stay buried forever. Chris became suspicious of his father’s claims of innocence, and finally confronted him. Keller could no longer hide from the truth. “Joe Keller: (to his son Chris) You're a boy, what could I do! I'm in business, a man is in business; a hundred and twenty cracked, you're out of business...You lay forty years into a business and they knock you out in five minutes, what could I do, let them take forty years, let them take my life away?...I never thought they'd install them. I swear to God. I thought they'd stop ‘em before anybody took off....Chris, I did it for you, it was a chance and I took it for you. I'm sixty-one years old, when would I have another chance to make something for you? Sixty-one years old you don't get another chance, do ya?”

After this admission, things spiral downward. Joe Keller commits suicide. Keller had lived a seemingly happy and successful life, while all the while he knew that he was responsible for selling defective engines, for causing the deaths of 21 pilots, for foisting the entire blame on to his partner. He maintained an illusion of innocence; once that illusion was destroyed, so was his life.

How did he manage to maintain that illusion of innocence for so long? How did he sleep at night knowing the terrible things he had done? Like many people, Joe Keller was able to lie to himself, to block out feelings of guilt or personal responsibility. But the truth will out...and the consequences can be devastating.

The Torah reminds us to strive to be good and upright people, to overcome negative temptations. No one should assume that these lessons are not relevant or not needed. They are relevant and are needed.

Happy is the person who can stand before the Almighty with clean hands and pure heart.

Angel for Shabbat