

# **Angel for Shabbat: Parashat Mishpatim**

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By Rabbi Marc D. Angel

A story is told of a yeshiva student who was so poor that he could not afford a pair of shoes. In the midst of a cold winter, he went to a Jewish shoemaker and begged for shoes. The shoemaker replied that he sold shoes but did not give them away for free. If he gave to this student, others would come...and he simply couldn't afford to give away so many shoes. He had to make a living to support his family. The yeshiva student spent the winter without a decent pair of shoes.

Years passed and the student went on to become a great sage with an international reputation. He prepared a volume of Torah scholarship for publication and many Jews vied for the honor of sponsoring the book. Among those who approached the sage with a contribution was the shoemaker! The sage recognized him and politely told him that he already had sponsors for his book. He also reminded the shoemaker of the incident years ago, when the sage was just a yeshiva student who couldn't afford to buy shoes. "I needed your help then but I don't need it now. I don't hold a grudge. I know you had a business to run. I wish you only good things. But your charity now is not needed. It's too late."

The shoemaker was an average person trying to make a living. If he had known in advance that the yeshiva boy would turn out to be a great sage, he probably would have given him a pair of shoes when he needed them. Many people—probably most—would have done the same as the shoemaker; and many—probably most—would have missed the opportunity to do a mitzvah for a promising young man who would one day become great.

Parashat Mishpatim includes many laws relating to business, damages, borrowing and lending. We are presented with a framework for living a proper, honest life. But the parasha doesn't only include laws; it also provides an ethical framework for the laws. "Do not vex a stranger nor oppress him, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. You shall not afflict any widow or orphan....If you lend money to any of my people that is poor, you shall not be to him as a creditor, neither shall you lay upon him interest...and when he cries out to Me, I will hear; for I am gracious." We are not only to do what is right; we are to do what is righteous.

We are frequently called upon to help individuals, schools, organizations, charity funds etc. If we were prophets who knew in advance how these funds would be impactful years from now, we would better be able to calculate our responses. But like the shoemaker in the story, we don't know the future. It

may be right to provide assistance based on our current knowledge; but it is righteous to be as generous as possible with time and resources, in the hope that our goodness will bring relief now...and possibly be of inestimable value in the years ahead.

Many of us have received gracious gifts of advice, time, and money that meant a lot to us, that may have changed our lives for the good. Some fine people believed in us and invested in us. Likewise, we can help others when they turn to us. We can do this now, when they need us, not when it's too late.