

## DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

### “Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Parashat Mishpatim  
February 2020 / Shvat 5780

[darchai.noam@gmail.com](mailto:darchai.noam@gmail.com)  
[www.darchai-noam.com](http://www.darchai-noam.com)

How can the Parasha help us grow this week?

### Mishpatim – The importance of hard work

This week's Parsha of Mishpatim lists a large number of mitzvot. Let's focus on one particular mitzvah and explore a lesson we can learn from it.

A thief has to repay what he stole. In Shmot 21:37 we learn that the Torah imposes an additional, special penalty if one steals an ox or a sheep but is not able to return it because he has slaughtered it or sold it.

*“If a man steals an ox or a sheep and slaughters it or sells it, he shall pay five cattle for the ox or four sheep for the sheep.” (Shmot 21:37).*

Interestingly, the amount to be reimbursed differs for the theft of an ox compared to a sheep. The Gemara<sup>1</sup> explains the reason behind this discrepancy. Rabbi Meir explains that since the owner of the ox needs the ox to help him work his field, the theft of the ox forces the owner to sit idle. Sheep, on the other hand, are not used for productive labour. For that reason, the theft of the ox is more serious than the theft of the sheep, and accordingly the fine is higher.<sup>2</sup>

We can learn from here the importance that the Torah ascribes to honest work. We need to work to earn our parnasah (livelihood) and putting honest effort into doing so is a worthy endeavour. As we read in Tehillim: *“If you eat the toil of your hands, you are praiseworthy, and it is good for you.”*<sup>3</sup>

The Rabbis repeatedly praise honest labour. We must toil with our own two hands. Only then does Hashem send His blessing.<sup>4</sup> The Rama states explicitly that making money to earn a livelihood is called a mitzvah.<sup>5</sup> There is a halachic implication to this. Generally, if one joins in a meal with three adult males, he is obligated to join in with the others for a zimun before bentching.<sup>6</sup> This means that he should not leave the meal early. However, if one has to leave the meal early to attend to a mitzva then he may do so, provided that there are still enough people to say the zimun without him. The Mishnah Berurah writes that if one is under pressure to leave early in order to avoid losing money then he may also leave early. For example, if he needs to get up early to make it to work this would qualify as a mitzva and permit him to bentch to himself early and miss out on the zimun.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Baba Kama 79b.

<sup>2</sup> In Darchai Noam for this Parasha in 5777 (2017) we focused on another explanation for the discrepancy which is brought in the same Gemara. In short: Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai explains that when one steals an ox, the ox follows the thief on its own legs without the thief being required to carry it. In contrast, when a thief steals a sheep, he has to pick up the sheep and carry it on his shoulders, thereby suffering embarrassment. This embarrassment is taken into consideration and serves to reduce the severity of the fine. It is remarkable that the Torah is so sensitive to people's feelings that it even takes into account the embarrassment of a thief!

<sup>3</sup> Tehillim 128:2.

<sup>4</sup> Midrash Tanchuma, Parashat Vayetze, taken from the footnote to the Artscroll interlinear Tehillim, Schottenstein edition.

<sup>5</sup> Orach Chaim 248:4.

<sup>6</sup> Zimun refers to the extra passages that are recited before bentching when there are 3 men present.

<sup>7</sup> See Mishnah Berurah (siman 193 seif katan 16) and Rav Moshe Feinstein (Igrot Moshe Orach Chaim 1:56).

We have seen the importance of working hard. However, since we are Jewish people imbued with a spiritual neshama, surely our work is not limited to physical work alone. The concept of 'work' for a Jew surely also extends to spiritual work. For instance, the Artscroll commentary to Perek Shira states as follows:

*Though honest work is praiseworthy... man must not make the desire for money his primary goal. When one has enough one should seek spiritual health.* <sup>8</sup>

Just like physical toil, spiritual work is also difficult. Rav Yisrael Salanter, the founder of the Mussar movement, stated that it is easier to learn the entire Talmud than to change one character trait. Achieving results requires constant awareness and effort.

In his book, "Chovat Hatalmid",<sup>9</sup> the Piasezna Rebbe<sup>10</sup> discusses how much we must work on our spiritual development. He compares it to the toil and sweat that people invest to draw out the treasures from the earth (such as growing crops and mining for minerals). Similarly, humans, who were created from the earth, have to invest toil and sweat to draw out their spiritual treasures that are hidden within. If someone thinks that they can progress in their service of Hashem without toil and without forcing themselves to work, they are sorely mistaken.

The Piasezna Rebbe explains that a farmer realises that they have to work hard out of necessity. They do not have a choice. If they do not work their fields they will starve to death! Similarly, if we don't work hard on the task of revealing our soul and improving our holiness, Torah, prayer and other aspects of serving Hashem, we will starve spiritually.

We must remember that Hashem selected us to be His chosen people. If we are to live up to this responsibility and reveal the treasure that is within us, we must work hard to do so.

These are stirring words from the Piasezna Rebbe. But how do we decide how to allocate our efforts? We only have limited time and energy.

It is worth noting the teaching in the Gemara: "Rabbi Chanina said, 'Everything is in the hands of Heaven, except for the fear of Heaven'".<sup>11</sup> The outcome of all of our physical efforts are purely in the hands of Heaven. We have to put in the effort to earn our livelihood, however Hashem decides how successful we will be and how much we will earn. However, the effect and outcome of our spiritual progress (i.e. our fear of Heaven) is left up to us. If we don't put in sufficient work, then the outcome will undoubtedly fall short.

Let us remember that we were put in this world for hard work. We have to struggle to achieve our tefikid (Divine purpose) and tikkun (soul rectification). Life wasn't meant to be easy. Working hard in both the physical and spiritual realms is valued as important by the Torah. However, we must take care not to invest too much effort into our physical labour at the expense of our spiritual work.

Let's try something this week:

1. Remember that the Torah values putting in hard and honest work to earn a living.
2. Keep in mind that hard work is also required in order to accomplish in our spiritual endeavours.

Shabbat shalom,

Rabbi Ledder

\* To subscribe to Darchai Noam, please email [darchai.noam@gmail.com](mailto:darchai.noam@gmail.com) with the word 'Subscribe' in the subject.

---

<sup>8</sup> Paraphrase of the Artscroll commentary to Tehillim 128:2 (which was quoted above) in the Schottenstein edition of Perek Shira.

<sup>9</sup> "The Student's Obligation". The following idea actually appears in the first of three discourses which are appended to the book.

<sup>10</sup> Rabbi Kalonymous Kalman Shapira (1889-1943).

<sup>11</sup> Brachot 33b.