

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Parashat Mishpatim
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How can the Parasha help us grow this week?

Parashat Mishpatim – Respecting your parents

In this week's Parasha of Mishpatim, we learn many different halachot that pertain to all areas of our lives. Included in this list are some of the most serious crimes that a person can commit. However, interspersed among this list are some crimes that at first glance seem out of place:

*“If a man plots deliberately against his fellow to **murder** him with cunning, [even] from My altar you shall take him to die. “One who **strikes his father or mother** shall surely be put to death. One who **kidnaps** a man and sells him, and he is found to have been in his power shall surely be put to death. One who **curses his father or mother** shall surely be put to death.” (Sefer Shmot, Parshat Mishpatim 21: 14-17)*

We already know the importance of the mitzva of Kibud Av v'Em (honouring and respecting our parents) from the fact that it was one of the Ten Commandments that we read in last week's Parasha. However, this week's Parasha shows just how important this mitzvah is. Striking or cursing a parent is listed together with the extremely serious crimes of murder and kidnapping and is punishable with the death penalty! Why?

Some commentators have suggested that all of the relationships that we experience in this world are to teach us how to relate to Hashem.¹ It is difficult to relate to an invisible G-d, Whom we cannot comprehend or understand with our limited, finite minds. We can however understand and relate to our relationships in this world. And we can use our experience from those relationships and apply them to our relationship with Hashem.²

For most people, their primary relationship is with their parents. We can all relate to the feeling of being a child, having been brought into the world through our parents. And we all have the same ultimate father – our Father in Heaven. As we say in the Avinu Malkeinu prayer – Hashem is firstly our **Father** and then our **King**. This supports the idea that our relationship with our parents teaches us how we should be relating to Hashem.

Other relationships also teach us about Hashem. The story is told of a devout Jew in Russia who was upset when he heard that the wicked Czar had died. He explained that when the Czar was alive, it was possible to understand what it meant to be subservient to a powerful king. This could help people to relate to Hashem as our King. Now that the Czar had died, people would not be able to truly appreciate what this means. In countries where there is no king or powerful ruler, we can struggle to conjure up the requisite awe and respect for Hashem which we would learn from being the subject of a human king.

Another relationship which teaches us about an aspect of our relationship with Hashem is the relationship between spouses. Shir Hashirim (The Song of Songs), composed by Shlomo Hamelech, describes the relationship between Bnei Yisrael and Hashem in terms of the intimate relationship between a man and wife.

A parent who is blessed with children is provided with a hint of what Hashem must feel, so to speak, towards His children. The love and the pride that parents feel reflects Hashem's love and pride. At times, however, children misbehave, and parents may feel frustrated that the child is not acting in their own best interest. However, when parents consider that often they act the same way towards their Father, it can bring a new perspective to the behaviour of their children. Also, just as they know that they still love their child no matter what, parents can relate to that feeling and trust that Hashem still loves them no matter what.

Our relationship with our parents is usually our first relationship and is the template for all of our future relationships. If we can learn to treat our parents with respect, we can hopefully learn how to treat Hashem with respect. If we practice honouring and revering our parents, we can improve how we honour and revere Hashem. If our parents sometimes

¹ This is not my original idea. I believe that I first heard this in a shiur from Rabbi Akiva Tatz, but unfortunately I cannot locate the source.

² For those who are interested, there is actually nothing wrong with starting a sentence with “and” or “but”. But one shouldn't do it too often.

require us to do things that don't make sense, but we do them anyway, then we can more easily learn how to follow Hashem's chokim (non-rational commandments) simply 'because He said so'.

Incidentally, there are other relatives which must also be honoured, although not to the same degree as one's parents. This includes grandparents, in-laws and older siblings.³

We can explore this relationship further from three perspectives – as children, as parents and as children of Hashem.

As children

We should be familiar with the parameters of the mitzvah of respecting our parents so that we can perform this mitzvah correctly. Broadly speaking, there are two aspects to this mitzvah – honouring one's parents (which are the positive acts) and revering our parents (which are the negative acts from which we must refrain).⁴ Honouring one's parents includes caring for their needs, such as making sure that they have food and drink and are physically taken care of. Revering one's parents is based on the understanding that parents and children are not equal. Practically, this aspect of the mitzvah includes:

- Not sitting in our parent's chair without permission
- Not directly contradicting anything that our parents say (if we must disagree then we should state it in a respectful manner e.g. "if I'm not mistaken, I understood it differently")
- Not even saying that we agree with our parent's words when in their presence
- Never referring to our parents by their first name, even after they have passed away
- Never raising our voice or speaking disrespectfully to our parents
- Standing up when our parent enters the room (this may seem strange in modern society, but it is a very appropriate way to demonstrate respect for one's parents)

As parents

What is our responsibility as parents in teaching and commanding respect from our children? This is an important aspect of the child-parent relationship that is often overlooked. Many parents do not feel that they receive the appropriate level of respect from their children. Perhaps parents should ask themselves how much they are themselves responsible for this phenomenon. There are at least two ways that parents might be inadvertently contributing to a lack of respect. Firstly, many adults like to dress down in casual clothes or behave and talk like people who are much younger than they are. How can parents expect their children to respect them if the parents are behaving like their children's equal? We need to remember that there is a gap between parents and children, and this is healthy and should not be minimised. Secondly, parents may neglect to enforce correct behaviour consistently and discipline their children in an appropriate manner for any breach.

Parents must remember though not to command respect to satisfy their own drive for honour. It is all for the benefit of the children. Parents must seek respect from their children in order to train them to do the mitzvah properly, to learn to have respect for authority and ultimately to learn how to respect Hashem.

As children of Hashem

Finally, we can take the lessons that we can learn from the parent-child relationship and apply them to our relationship with Hashem. Just as we have to revere our parents, so too we have to revere Hashem. Just like we can't sit on our parent's chair without permission, so too we can't use a shule or Bet Midrash for our own purposes. Just like we can't call our parents by their first name, we can't take Hashem's name in vain. And when we look at our children⁵ and notice the childish, immature things that they do, we should reflect on that and realise that we sometimes act the same way towards our Father. We should take this as a reminder to increase our respect for our own parents and our honour and fear of Hashem.

Let's try something this week:

1. Try to brush up on the laws of honouring and respecting our parents, and try to follow these laws!
2. Try to apply our observations and lessons from our relationship with our parents and our children to our relationship with Hashem.

Shabbat shalom, Rabbi Ledder

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³ As a first-born child I couldn't resist mentioning this one.

⁴ See Shulchan Aruch Yoreh Deah Siman 240 and the excellent summary that appears here: <http://www.aish.com/j/jewish-law/daily-living/8-Honoring-Parents.html>

⁵ Those who are not blessed with children can learn the same lessons by observing nieces, nephews, children of friends etc.