

Shabbat Shalom with a Side of Torah – Mishpatim

Every once in a while, I dabble in the study of Mussar. Mussar is the Jewish study of ethical life choices founded by Rabbi Israel Salanter. This week happens to be the 126th anniversary of his Yahrzeit (death anniversary). I guess I really do not dabble; I keep trying to refresh and renew myself. The standard for the student of Mussar is pretty strict. There are actually eighteen awarenesses one must take into consideration in the study. The extent to which one masters these attributes defines a person as an ethical being. No one is perfect. We all fall short, and some of us a little shorter than others. There is a presumption, though, that we all wish to be able to live ethical lives, even while some of us get horribly distracted. The list of attributes includes humility, patience, gratitude, compassion, order, equanimity, honor, simplicity, enthusiasm, silence, generosity, truth, moderation, loving kindness, responsibility, trust, faith, and awe. Were we to be proficient in each of these ideologies and behaviors, we would bring peace to the world. The thrust of Mussar, though, is that it takes our work and our effort towards achieving this goal.

In looking at the above list, few would be able to argue with its sagacity or its completeness. Yet, we pray to God, as though God is responsible for everything that happens. We thank God for the blessings of health and for food, for prosperity and security. Every prayerbook/hymnal of every religious denomination contains these prayers. Yes, there is the adage, “Pray as if everything depends on God, but act as if everything depends on you.” If we cannot expect God to answer the prayer, then why pray? And to rely solely on God, what then? Dr. Martin King, Jr. spoke, “The belief that God will do everything for man is as untenable as the belief that man can do everything for himself. It, too, is based on a lack of faith. We must learn that to expect God to do everything while we do nothing is not faith but superstition.” Caught somewhere in the middle is the notion that while we must act, there are times that power beyond ourselves become necessary for success.

Our Torah portion this week (Mishpatim) gives us a long list of rules and precepts regarding property and personal engagement. It is of note that this list comes even after the 10 Commandments and while Moses is still atop Mt. Sinai. So, while we do not often speak of the conversation past Exodus 20, there are some “gems” to be found. This text speaks of slavery/servitude, criminal penalty for kidnapping and murder, justice within the courts – a total of 53 mitzvot (precepts) in all. Tucked into the text is one that does not get a lot of play, but which has ultimate significance in light of the above dilemma.

The Torah says one who injures his neighbor must “provide for his complete healing” [Ex. 21:19]. In a subtle way, the text affirms the idea that we are responsible for even the miracle of healing. Commenting on this text, the Talmud [Baba Kama 85a] teaches that God granted doctors permission to heal. Even with natural diseases, we do not say, ‘Since God made him ill, it is up to God to heal him,’ but do our best to heal him. So, what is the role of God in our lives? This is an unsettling question for those who pray to God to take over in all situations. Erich Fromm would argue that “God” is only the word we use to describe a life, were it possible, which is paradigmatic of all the virtues listed above. Many will argue that “God” is only a job description for the forces that control the natural world. I think, perhaps the answer that makes the most sense for me comes from the Torah, but is best stated by Rabbi David Cooper in the title of his book, “God Is A Verb.” In the Torah, “God” tells Moses, “Ehyeh asher ehyeh.”

Ehyeh is a form of the verb to be, as is the four letter word YHWH used as “God’s” name. God tells Moses to tell the people simply that God exists. However God may work in the world, it cannot replace our work and the attention we must pay to being intentional in the healing work of which the world is in need. The closer we get to living a life in accordance with the teachings of Mussar, the more apt we are to see and hear the needs of those around us. Perhaps this is the best description of how God works in the world. Maybe God does not create miracles; rather the world created provides us the opportunities and the rewards and punishments that accompany our decisions to participate in or refrain from the behavior that creates the miracle. God cannot do what we are not willing to do. As such the text reminds us that it is our obligation to bring our neighbor to a complete healing. Perhaps God is the force in the world that creates the tools for us to do this work, and maybe we need to pay more attention to gathering and using more of these tools. May Rabbi Salanter’s teaching and memory always be a blessing. Shabbat Shalom.