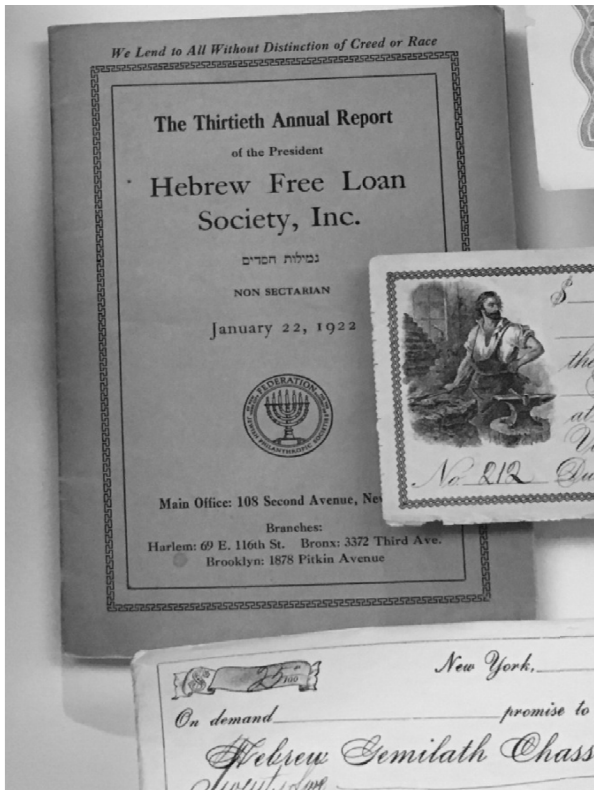


available for sustaining the poor are limited, shouldn't we look out for our own first?



Minutes from the Annual Meeting of the Hebrew Free Loan Society, 1927, and HFLS promissory notes

flooding into the city with interest-free loans to help them start businesses.

The Society combined a focus on identifying and meeting need within the Jewish community with a policy to make loans “without distinction of creed or race.” This approach attempted (and attempts to this day) to include both the stranger and the countryman in a common circle of concern. It exemplifies a deeply Jewish desire to view universalism and particularism not as a binary choice, but as two indispensable elements of our religious stance.

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At another level, it is a question of who “we” are. After all, the first of 36 warnings in the Torah against wronging the stranger appears just two lines before the prohibition against charging interest (Exod. 22:20). And Jews are paradigmatic strangers.

Jewish communities have long struggled with balancing the responsibilities of a covenantal community with the universalism implicit in the notion of one God. In 1892, the same year that Ellis Island opened its immigrant processing center, the Hebrew Free Loan Society of New York was founded to provide New Yorkers

Mishpatim 5777

משפטים תשע"ז



Expanding our Understanding of the Religious Life

Rabbi David Hoffman, Vice Chancellor and Chief Advancement Officer, JTS

There is a strange—little spoken about—law that my mind, particularly over the last few months, keeps re-visiting. The Talmud teaches that when one builds a synagogue or house of study the structure should preferably have windows (BT Berakhot 34b). Indeed, this idea is codified as law in the foundational legal code, the Shulhan Arukh (OH 90:2).

The medieval commentaries offer differing reasons for this law. Rashi suggests that the windows expose the sky, drawing our eyes to the heavens; allowing our gaze to be drawn upwards creates the proper humility as we try to relate to the Transcendent. Rabbenu Yonah writes that letting light into a dark space calms the soul and allows one to be more settled and arrive at the appropriate mindset for prayer (see Beit Yosef, O.H. 90:4). For me, windows in the academy and in houses of prayer have always been a precious and needed form of agitation. The light captures my attention and draws me into the world, into the streets. The windows are a reminder that the religious experience I pursue as I try to connect with God through prayer and the study of holy texts must reach beyond the ecclesiastical walls. Judaism demands that there always be a creative dialectic between the world and the *beit midrash*. For Torah to realize its promise and be all that it is meant to be for the world, its teachings must reverberate in the markets and the streets, in the halls of government and in our homes.

A version of this point is made by the juxtaposition between last week's parashah of Yitro and this week's reading of Mishpatim. Last Shabbat, we read about how the Israelites, after three days of preparation, confronted God's awesome presence at Sinai through a thick cloud. With parashat Yitro, the people touch lofty heights. Sinai represents a moment of intimacy between the Israelites and their Redeemer. As we move from Yitro to Mishpatim, we might

have expected an elaboration of ritual laws that would govern the people's particular relationship with the Divine. We might have imagined an introduction of the ritual laws of tefillin or tzitzit, Shabbat, festivals or kashrut—laws that give expression to the particularity of the Divine relationship with the Jewish people.

But the first laws that are expounded after this intense and intimate religious moment are the laws detailing behavior between people generally. The first laws of the Covenant given immediately after Sinai are about the rights of servants, the commands not to oppress the stranger, not to mistreat the widow and the orphan, not to speak false rumors about people. We are introduced to the laws governing physical damages, property law, and a vision of how best to adjudicate judgment. That is to say, these are laws that form the basis of our interactions with other human beings (*bein adam lehavero*). None of these laws are seemingly particular to the Jewish people's relationship with their God, but rather offer universal moral direction on how to create a just and ethical society.

The meaning behind the juxtaposition between these two parshiyot of Yitro and Mishpatim is echoed in the Ten Commandments themselves. On the first tablet we find commands that govern our relationship with the Divine. On the second tablet we have commands that govern our interactions with human beings.

Our reading this Shabbat of Mishpatim—and its almost total focus on the laws that must govern interactions between people—serves as an important corrective to the dangers that inhere in the religious experience. Too often the focus of religious life becomes self-centered, the practitioner prioritizing her individual spiritual world and relationship with God to the exclusion of others and their wellbeing. This inward-looking focus reifies a religiosity in which the pursuit of closeness to God comes to distance us from God's world. This is not how it should be, the Torah warns. Sinai was a one-time experience, an encounter that must not serve as a paradigm for intimacy with the Divine. Moving forward, the people are implicitly told that their relationship with God is developed and deepened as much through the pursuit of justice between human beings (*bein adam lehavero*) as it is through ritual behavior (*bein adam lamakom*). The Talmud has its own language for this idea. “Rav Yehudah said, ‘One who wishes to be devout (*hasid*) should fulfill the words of the laws of damages’” (BT Bava Kama 30a). One's relationship with God is deepened when love of God

manifests itself not only in sacrifices or prayers, but in also heeding the laws that govern relationships between people. Both in its biblical and Talmudic iterations, the power of the Torah is that it expands the religious life to include civil law and the pursuit of justice generally.

In fact, Rashi makes this point in a gorgeous way in his first comment on Exodus 21. He tells us that the Sanhedrin, the great court of the ancient Jewish people, had to be located in the Temple. This placement should serve as a reminder that the court that heard monetary claims and other civil litigation between people must understand its work of adjudication as a religious activity. Just as the sacrifices that were offered in the Temple constituted a form of worship, so too was the work of the court an expression of Divine service (*avodah*).

Looking out the windows these days we must be careful not to let ourselves become overwhelmed by the dissonance between what the Torah hopes for the world and the world as it currently is. It would be too easy and so wrong to retreat into the *beit midrash* and into our prayers. Mishpatim pushes us past this response, reminding us that we are not to stay at Sinai, but instead must move into the enterprise of building a just society. Mishpatim reminds us that this work is essential to the religious life.

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דבר אחר | A Different Perspective



Taking Care of Ourselves and the Stranger

Rabbi David Rosenn, Adjunct Instructor of Professional Skills, JTS

This week's Torah reading contains instructions for taking care of one's own: “If you lend money to My people, to the poor among you, do not act toward them like a creditor; exact no interest from them” (Exod. 22:25).

Deuteronomy is even clearer, stating, “You shall not charge interest on loans to your countrymen, interest on money, interest on food, interest on anything that is lent for interest. *But you may charge interest to a foreigner...*” (23:20-21).

In many sources, this distinction caused unease. At one level, particularism is a very human response to the problem of scarce resources. If the funds