

929 Exodus Chapter 22

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929, the number of chapters in Tanakh, is the name of a project dedicated to creating a global Jewish conversation. 929 invites Jews everywhere to read Tanakh, one chapter a day, together with a website of pluralistic interpretations from a wide range of contributors, including a JTS rabbinical student each Monday. Here is a past contribution from this week's parashah. Visit 929.org.il to learn more.

“You shall not mistreat any widow or orphan. If you do mistreat them, for if they cry out at all to Me, I will surely hear their cry. My wrath shall burn, and I will kill you with the sword, and your wives shall be widows and your children orphans.” (vv. 21-23)

This famous declaration teaches us a central Jewish value: respect for all people, including the most vulnerable. While the verse only mentions widows and orphans by name, we can expand the category to all people who may need extra care and gentleness.

In the original Hebrew, this passage contains a bit of a grammatical oddity. The first verse, “you shall not mistreat,” uses “you” in the plural; the second, “if you do mistreat them,” uses “you” in the singular; the third, “I will kill you,” returns to “you” in the plural. Ibn Ezra, a medieval Biblical commentator, writes that the grammar in these three verses teaches us about collective responsibility. If I see someone mistreating a widow, orphan, or other vulnerable person, and I do nothing to stop it, I myself am counted as one who mistreated the person. The final verse, containing the punishment, is written in the plural, because even if one person mistreats a vulnerable person, all who did not intervene are guilty and deserving of punishment.

As we walk through the world, we are often witnesses to unjust interactions between people, and it can be difficult to stand up and demand justice. We can easily think to ourselves that stopping the mistreatment is someone else's responsibility, or that we do not have the authority to step in. We must challenge ourselves, however, to keep Ibn Ezra's teaching in mind: when we are bystanders, we are culpable.

Mishpatim 5779

משפטים תשע"ט



Opt-In Judaism

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“I’m gonna make him an offer he can’t refuse” may be the most well-known line of any movie. Spoken by Don Corleone to Johnny Fontane in *The Godfather*, it communicates the chilling reality of doing business with a mobster.

The Talmud suggests that God made a similar offer to Israel at Mount Sinai (BT Shabbat 88a). The Torah’s description that Israel stood *under* the mountain (תחתית ההר) to receive revelation in Exod 19:17, inspires the Rabbis to imagine God holding the mountain over the people—threatening them to accept the Torah . . . or else.

In contrast to the Talmud, the Torah appears deeply invested in Israel’s self-determination. At the close of Parashat Mishpatim, Israel declares—נעשה ונשמע—we will do and obey (Exod 24:7). God may be holding a mountain over their heads, coercing them into obedience, but Israel formally accepts God’s Torah and consents to living by its laws.

A similar dynamic appears in the opening of the parashah. Remarkably, Mishpatim opens with laws concerning the mandated liberation of Israelite slaves after six years of service. The placement of these laws at the start of the parashah reveals how deeply the Torah values freedom and demonstrates concern for the marginal. If an individual enters servitude married, he leaves with his wife. However, if his master provides him with a wife and they have children, he leaves alone; the wife and kids belong to the master.

An individual can choose to remain in servitude. If so, the person must declare their intention to do so and say: “I love my master, my wife and my children. I will not go free.” It is understandable why someone would choose servitude if the cost of freedom was losing your wife and kids. The opportunity to remain with your family seems like an offer impossible to refuse.

Still, it is striking that Parashat Mishpatim opens and closes with statements of consent. The Torah’s insistence that the Hebrew slave and Israel opt in to their service speaks deeply to me and captures something essential and precious to my Jewish identity.

I am an opt-in Jew—*not* because I was not born Jewish, but because I came from a secular home that was not shaped by Jewish life or Jewish learning. My Jewish journey began in college when I fell into the Hillel and Jewish studies courses at Wesleyan University. I was only 18 years old—a teenager—when my Jewish education began and yet I have always felt like I began learning too late. I am acutely aware of what I do not have. Because my Jewish identity formed as a young adult and not as a child, Jewish texts and traditions do not live in my bones the way they do for “natives”. I will never be able to quote Torah like I can quote the lines from a *Godfather* movie. Jewish rituals will never feel like second nature to me. I will never have an uncomplicated, unquestioning relationship to Judaism.

But with the perspective gained over time, I feel grateful for being an opt-in Jew, and recognize the ways in which being one has enriched my Jewish identity. Judaism may not live in my bones, but I will never take it for granted. Jewish learning and living compels me. I saw its value when I was 18 and I continue to see its value and beauty. I want to live and learn as a Jew. I did not have to. I chose to, and this choice, the fact that I chose, makes my Judaism a precious and intentional practice.

Perhaps most of all, I now appreciate having a complicated and questioning relationship to Judaism. My intellectual and religious selves grew together while at college and, as a result, always will remain integrated. I used to lament that I never had a child’s perspective of Judaism in which events like the splitting of the Reed Sea and the receiving of God’s Torah at Sinai were accepted without question. I

have always questioned. But these questions give my Judaism a depth that I cherish and a persistent drive to understand better and to learn more. They keep me engaged.

Israel’s story told in the Torah is a story of becoming. Israel was not always Israel. Over time, Israel became God’s people through shared experience, values, theological perspective, and practice. At Sinai, Israel accepts God’s laws and consents to live by them. Israel opts in. We will do and obey.

Like Israel, I opted in and continue to. For me, choosing to live a Jewish life means affirming and engaging with Judaism—its value and beauty—every day of my life. Jewish practice, values, and belief will never feel rote for me. I will never take them for granted. I understand how they enrich my life. I want them in my life.

These days, we worry a lot about Jewish continuity. Becoming a Jew may be the key to staying a Jew. There is value in choice. And we should celebrate it. We should see Judaism as something to affirm continuously and worry less about demographics and whether enough Jewish babies are born. As a Jewish educator, as someone who works with Jewish young adults who are forming their intellectual and religious selves, I hope to show my students the value, beauty, and relevance of our tradition. I want them to ask questions. I want their Judaism to be intellectually and religiously vibrant and satisfying. I want them to work on their Jewish identities, to feel that they are always becoming Jews, and to feel that the texts and traditions of Judaism shape who they are. I want them to opt in.

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