

## Sermon Parashat Mishpatim 5767

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It's mid-noon but an afternoon siesta is the last thing on the minds of these harassed Indian villagers. In what has almost become a daily ritual in India's northeastern Assam state of Goreshwar, dozens of villagers light fires in the tall thickets of grass to scare away the herds of rampaging elephants. If the villagers' fires don't help, they hope the crackers will drive them away. Forest officials say that every year as harvesting season begins, the herds come out. The villagers can't leave Goreshwar because they rely on the harvest for their livelihood. However, the elephants keep coming back. Nature and humanity clash. Neither can get out of the others way. It seems that humanity and nature are once again in conflict. However, this example is only a microcosm of the greater problem we face in our world today. Humanity simply hasn't yet learned how to live in harmony with our planet. The truth is, we haven't even learned how to live in harmony with each other so it's not so hard to imagine that we are unable to live in harmony with animals. I'm not sure which will make the compelling argument for the other. I'm not sure that we will learn to get along with each other and then preserve the environment; or, we will learn to care for our planet and then appreciate the value of human life. I suppose the opponent that is most powerful will be the most instructive. We have many examples of our world lashing back at us and we have an equal number of examples of humanity destroying itself.

In the seventies it was the war on drugs and now it's the war in Iraq, but we've never given language to the war on our environment. I realize that in the next election campaign, which in case you hadn't noticed has already begun, the issue that will be most on people's minds is how the war in Iraq is being handled and of course - if Al Gore wins an Oscar for his movie, "An Inconvenient Truth." He will re-introduce the war on the environment and it's most high profile skirmish, "global warming." Either way, we have become very good at identifying the struggle. The problem is we haven't gotten very far at resolution and maybe it's because we haven't created the small steps. The Talmud teaches, "*Tafasta merubah lo tefasta.*" If you try and hold too much you end up dropping everything. Maybe our initiatives and goals are too lofty, too grandiose. Maybe we just need little steps. Maybe we need to learn to walk before we can run, and truthfully, I think we need to learn to crawl. That's why this week's reading gives us small steps on how to build a just society and a meaningful relationship with the Divine. In one verse, "Read through the eyes of the Or HaHayim," we have a formula for reconciliation with each other and with the world.

For generations rabbis have been trying to make the case for keeping kosher. There have been those who suggest we ought to maintain the standards of Kashrut for health reasons. Do you remember the commercial for Hebrew National frankfurters, which claims that the contents of their franks are better because they exceed the FDA standards and answer to a higher authority? We have a voice in our tradition which claims we ought to keep kosher because it develops our capacity to live disciplined lives. We even have the valid opinion that we ought to keep kosher to develop our ability to be observant of God's command - even if there is no plausible rationale for doing so. That is faith manifest in action. We believe in God, we believe God instructs us on how to behave, and therefore, we do it. Each one of those explanations leaves me somewhat unsatisfied. I don't believe in "Because I said so" religion. We know that a healthy diet can be accomplished without separate dishes. Let me now suggest another possibility.

If we learn how to treat the non-human world with respect, then maybe this will be a step toward learning how to treat each other. Samuel Dresner, in an incredible book which I give to every person whose home we kasher, called “The Jewish Dietary Laws: Their Meaning for our Time” writes, “The lesson of reverence for life which the laws of kashrut teach has by no means been accepted in our world where life, both animal and human, seems to be the cheapest of all commodities.” For Dresner, Kashrut is about understanding the sanctity of life. Maybe if we learn how to treat the most vulnerable of creatures, we could develop a capacity for kindness towards one another.

So we read “*Lo tivashel gidi bahalev imo.*” “Don’t cook a goat in its mother’s milk.” We need to develop our capacity for kindness and to strengthen our propensity toward humane behavior. The image the Torah draws upon in this most basic principle is to understand that our human drive to kill has a price. Hold it in check and learn to be humane. Don’t tear the child from its nursing mother to slaughter. It’s just wrong. I am not suggesting as Rav Kook does, that we should be vegetarians, though that is clearly the ideal. I am merely suggesting we begin to hold our drives in check. We can do so by realizing there are repercussions to our actions. When we eat meat we develop our ability to take life, when we observe kashrut we develop our sense that life has a value and we do not take it so lightly.

So again I say, maybe if we learn how to treat the non-human world, then this could be a step toward learning how to treat each other. That is why the comment by the “Or HaHayim” is so wonderful. Commenting on the first part of the verse “Bring the first fruits of your land to the house of God,” the “Or HaHayim” remarks, “*Ki HaMashhitim Zaraam sovivim mitat kitanim*” (ad locum Exodus 23:19), “Those who waste the saplings of trees will certainly waste the young and, therefore, we can conclude, that if young life has no value than no life has value.” By connecting the first part of the verse regarding the issue of the first fruits, and the second part of the verse that instructs us about the cooking of a goat in its mother’s milk, the “Or HaHayim” subtly teaches that sensitivity is learned by the way we interact with our world starting when we are very young. The value of life, as Dresner puts it, is the reverence for life as a slope. You can go either way. Refining your ability to preserve and sanctify it, or to destroy it without regard. However, know you are on a slope and you can go up or down, you just can’t stand still. So you need to pick your route. “Kashrut,” keeping kosher, says you can always go up the slope.

Today join me as we move up the slope. Start with a small step. Start by making a decision to change the way you eat. Each time, and every context in which we eat, we have a chance to acknowledge who we are, who we want to be and who we ought to be. Let it begin at home. Let’s just say each time you eat at home you are going to strengthen your ability to be kind to the people in your house. We can come to your home and help, if need be.

If it just won’t work at home, let it be at work. When you order in or have a lunch meeting, make a conscious decision as to what you are going to eat, so that in turn you can decide how you are going to treat the people around you. If you can’t do it at work because it simply won’t work, then try it when you are out socially. Decide that what you will eat will help you think about how you will treat those friends with whom you socialize.

We are all different people in different circumstances and we can be whomever we desire in each situation. Maybe who we are in those varied locations can have a carry over to the other places. We have to begin somewhere. Kindness, so critical to our survival, must begin somewhere. Ultimately, keeping kosher is about consumption. "Kashrut" is the first teacher of conspicuous consumption. Keeping kosher says that every time you open your mouth, you control what goes in and what comes out. With every bite you take, you can make the world a little gentler, a little more sympathetic. With every bite we can change the world just a little bit.

The business of rabbinical supervision is complicated. The animal must be of a certain category and slaughtered in the proper way. We require someone to supervise the process to insure the laws of Kashrut are observed, and that the food on our tables is acceptable for consumption under Jewish law. From the time when rabbinical supervision became a way of life for the organized Jewish community, the only aspect of food preparation that was supervised was how the food was treated. After finding sub-standard working conditions at the country's largest kosher slaughterhouse in Postville, Iowa, there seemed to be little or no concern for how the people preparing the food were treated. Spurred by reports that the kosher meat industry was lacking in employee supervision, the Conservative Movement launched an extraordinary initiative that once again finds itself teaching the Jewish world values that are sacred. In this program called "Tzedek," Hechsher reminds us that we must be very careful of the food we eat and the manner in which it was prepared. We must make sure that both the animals and those individuals who work for these companies are treated humanely.

We should be very proud that our very own Rabbi Rozenwasser was asked by this commission to visit local kosher slaughterhouses, because of his ability to communicate with the labor force to determine how they are being treated. Of course, there is opposition to this new standard of practice. We ought to demand it because it is what is right and it observes the time-honored laws of keeping kosher. I believe we can elevate the industry's standards of best practices - and this too will happen one step at a time.

It is clear that God has already given us instruction and motivation, but for some reason we haven't gotten it yet. Maybe we will one bite at a time, a little bit at a time.