

## **D'var Torah: Parashat Mishpatim**

by Akiva Wagner - Wednesday, January 30, 2019

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**This week the Chief Rabbi asks what it is that makes a person religious.**

How can you tell if a person is truly religious?

A number of our Parshiot commence with the word 'Eileh'. Such as, "Eileh Toldot Noach" – "These are the generations of Noach." "Eileh Hadevarim" – "These are the words." "Eileh Phekudei HaMishkan" – "These are the reckonings of the Mishkan."

But Parashat Mishpatim commences, "V'Eileh Hamishpatim" – "And these are the ordinances."

Strict grammarians will tell us that you do not start a sentence with the word 'and' – and you definitely don't start a whole chapter or passage with the word 'and'. But that is exactly what we do at the beginning of Mishpatim.

Rashi tells us that the conjunction 'and' here serves to link our Parsha to the previous one. He says, "Ma Harishonim M'Sinai Af Eiluh M'Sinai – Just as the previous passage, dealing with the Ten Commandment and laws concerning the Alter, were given to us at Mount Sinai – so too the passage of Mishpatim which follows. The passage that deals with our responsibility to our fellow human beings – that too was given at Mount Sinai.

That is what the 'Vav' does for us. It enables us to appreciate that the content of Mishpatim is just as important as the content of Parashat Yitro.

It's all about what it means to be religious. If you ask people about being 'dati' (religious), they will immediately think of one's responsibilities to Hashem; davening, keeping Shabbat, Kashrut, spirituality and holiness. And of course, all of these are essential parts of being religious. But what the 'Vav' comes to teach us is that being scrupulous in your business matters, not damaging the property or hurting the feelings of other people, reaching out to assist all people – that too is an integral part of what true religion actually is. Both components of our conduct were given to us at Mount Sinai.

In Temple times, the 'Sanhedrin', which dealt with all matters pertaining to our relationships with others, was purposely situated on the Temple Mount, right next to the Temple itself. This was in order to indicate that what we offered on the Alter between ourselves and Hashem had to be accompanied by responsibility towards our fellows.

The Gemara in Masechet Baba Kamma, Daf Lamuf Amud Bet, teaches that if you would like to become a 'chassid' – a truly pious individual then you need to be an expert in 'Milei D'Nazikin' – the laws of damages as presented to us in the Parsha of Mishpatim. That is, ultimately, how one can become a perfectly pious and religious person.

However, the 'Vav' needs to work the other way round as well. Let no one think that just concentrating on our relationships with others is sufficient. In addition we need to have that relationship with Hashem. That is the power of the 'Vav' – to bring the two together.

So, how do you know if a person is truly religious?

You'll be able to see that they are connected to Hashem in a responsible way and are also outstanding in their approach to others.

They are people who are mindful of that crucially important 'Vav'.

Shabbat Shalom