



Divrei Torah on Jerusalem by Rabbi Yosef Bronstein Parashat Mishpatim / פרשת משפטים 5779

The Justice of Yerushalayim

Our parsha highlights the centrality of civil law in Judaism. Immediately after the Sinai experience the Torah transitions to the “mishpatim” which undergird the just society that the Torah is trying to build. The midrash builds upon this focus on civil law and attributes cosmic significance to the proper execution of the mishpatim:¹

These are the laws (mishpatim): This is what the verse states: “A king establishes the country with justice.”² God created the rule through judgement as the verse states “In the beginning, God (Elokim) created,”³ it does not say God (Hashem), but rather God (Elokim). So, too, Dovid states “God (Elokim) is a judge,”⁴ to teach you that God created the world with justice.

Picking up on the usage of the divine name of justice - Elokim - in the opening verse of the Torah, the midrash locates the mishpatim of the parsha and God’s attribute of judgement more generally at the center of God’s creative project.

This notion has implications for the nature of Yerushalayim. We are taught that the first location to be created was, in fact, Yerushalayim and the rest of the world spread from there. As God’s justice and judgement was at the heart of creation, similarly, Yerushalayim is intertwined with these themes.

Yerushalayim is the seat of the Sanhedrin, from which the ultimate judgement emanated to the people. God wants to reside in a city that is permeated with such justice. On the other side of the ledger, when this sense is lost, God abandons the city as Yeshayahu painfully describes:⁵

How has she become a harlot, a faithful city; full of justice, in which righteousness would lodge, but now murderers.

¹ Shemot Rabbah 30:13.

² Mishlei 29:4.

³ Bereishit 1:1.

⁴ Tehillim 75:8.

⁵ Yeshayahu 1:21.



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The measure of Yerushalayim's faithfulness to God is its degree of justice. Once the justice of this week's parsha is no longer present, God considers it a breach of trust and leaves the city.

In that very same chapter, Yeshayahu teaches of the ultimate repair of this breach: a return to the fairness and equity that undergird the fabric of creation and Yerushalayim:

Learn to do good, seek justice, strengthen the robbed, perform justice for the orphan, plead the case of the widow⁶

Zion shall be redeemed through justice and her penitent through righteousness.⁷

A return to justice will engender the ultimate redemption.

May we merit to live out the laws and values of this week's parsha and restore Yerushalayim to the justice-capital of the world.

⁶ Yeshayahu 1:17.

⁷ Yeshayahu 1:27. For an elaboration on this point see <https://www.yeshiva.org.il/midrash/16499> from the noted judge, R. Yosef Carmel.