

# The Land of Israel in the Parsha & Our Lives

By Rebbetzin Chana Bracha

## Parashat Mishpatim

### How are the Interpersonal Mitzvot Linked to the Holiness of the Land?

#### Can Social Justice Exist Without a Spiritual Foundation?

I've been a truth seeker since childhood. Even before I could define it, I was searching for a model of social justice rooted in spiritual and moral principles. I suppose I was born a spiritual seeker, always feeling like an outsider in a culture so focused on materialism. Never having experienced physical lack in life, I was drawn instead to advocate for the repair I felt was needed in the emotional and spiritual dimensions. As a teenager, I had many Marxist friends, largely due to my enrollment in the Free Gymnasium – an alternative high school where students helped run the institution. My parents agreed to let me attend only after I had first tried a regular high school. In hindsight, I understand their reluctance. The Free Gymnasium was not only a hub for leftist ideals but also a stronghold of vehement anti-Zionism, which often went hand in hand. I still remember walking into class one day in 1975 to find “**Zionism is Racism**” scrawled in bold letters across the blackboard – the same year the United Nations General Assembly declared Zionism a form of racial discrimination. Although I deeply believed in social equality, I couldn't help but feel shaken by that statement, which seemed to be directed personally against me. The Kibbutz principle of working according to one's ability and receiving compensation according to one's needs resonated with me, yet I struggled to embrace Marxism. It would have been easier – and more comfortable – to align with my Marxist friends, but no matter how much I tried, I couldn't accept its foundation: historical materialism, which argues that material conditions drive human history and transformation. I could never agree that the material framework determines how human beings evolve and shape the world. For me, the spiritual dimension has always been the true force behind everything that unfolds in the universe. Needless to say, when I discovered the Torah, its religious, ethical, and social laws resonated deeply with my soul.

#### Are our Divinely Ordained Ethical Laws Designed Particularly for the Holy Land?

*Parashat Mishpatim*, which follows the revelation at Mount Sinai, presents an extensive array of laws covering diverse aspects of life – ranging from the treatment of slaves to the justice system, from civil laws to moral conduct in daily day life. One of the most profound themes of *Parashat Mishpatim* is the intrinsic connection between these laws and the unique holiness of the Land of Israel. The Torah repeatedly emphasizes that the land is holy and that dwelling in it comes with divine responsibilities. The Land of Israel is not merely a geographical territory; it is the sacred place where the Jewish people are meant to fulfill their covenant with G-d. *Parashat Mishpatim* offers a glimpse into how the Torah's legal system is intricately tied to the spiritual nature of the land. While many of its laws focus on interpersonal relationships, property rights, and communal obligations, they also reflect a deeper, spiritual bond with Hashem that the land itself nurtures. This connection is established from the opening verse of *Mishpatim*, which determines the divine foundation of these interpersonal laws:

**ספר שמות פרק כא פסוק א וְאֵלֶּה הַמִּשְׁפָּטִים אֲשֶׁר תִּשִׂים לִפְנֵיהֶם:**

“And these are the judgments that you shall set before them” (*Shemot* 21:1).

From this verse, we learn that even the ethical principles governing human relationships – that upright people may have established on their own – are divinely ordained. As Rashi explains, the phrase “And these” (וְאֵלֶּה/*ve'eleh*) comes to add to what has been previously stated (*Tanchuma Mishpatim* 3). The

phrase serves to link *mishpatim* (interpersonal laws) to the Ten Commandments, underscoring that just as the laws at Sinai were divinely given, so too are the mitzvot of *Parashat Mishpatim*. Although these mitzvot appear to be merely laws of human behavior, they are divine imperatives that shape a nation embodying G-d's will. Their fulfillment is especially significant in the Land of Israel. This is so because the Jewish people are meant to establish a society based on divine justice and ethical responsibility, particularly in the Promised Land (Ramban, *Shemot* 21:1).

### How does *Shemita* (the Sabbatical Year) Foster a Special Relationship with the Land?

One of the core themes throughout the Torah is that the Land of Israel is a divine gift to the Jewish people – the place where Hashem's presence is uniquely manifest. Anyone who has made Aliyah or even visited Israel can testify to this truth. The principles of justice and communal responsibility in *Parashat Mishpatim* lay down the foundation for the relationship between the Jewish people and the land. For example, the mitzvah to observe the *Shemita* year:

**ספר שמות פרק כג פסוק י:** וְשֵׁשׁ שָׁנִים תִּזְרַע אֶת אֲרֶצְךָ וְאָסַפְתָּ אֶת תְּבוּאָתָהּ:

(יא) וְהַשְּׁבִיעַת תִּשְׁמַטְנָה וְנִטְשָׁתָה וְאָכְלוּ אֲבִינֵי עַמְּךָ וַיִּתְּרָם תֹּאכַל חֵיט הַשָּׂדֶה כִּן תַּעֲשֶׂה לְכַרְמְךָ לְזֵיתֶךָ:

“Six years you shall sow your land and gather in its produce. But the seventh year you shall let it rest and lie fallow” (*Shemot* 23:10-11).

This mitzvah exemplifies the Torah's holistic vision of justice, extending beyond human relationships to encompass the land itself. The concept of *Shemita* teaches us that Eretz Yisrael is not merely a piece of real estate – it is a living, entity. By relinquishing ownership and allowing the land to rest, we affirm that it ultimately belongs to Hashem. This act of *emunah* acknowledges that our sustenance doesn't mainly derive from human labor but from divine blessing. The *Shemita* year serves as a societal reset and a reminder that the land is on loan to the Israelites from G-d, and we are only its stewards. This understanding instills humility and dependence on divine providence, reinforcing the idea that rather than being self-sufficient we are always relying on Hashem (*Babylonian Talmud, Shemita* 9a). Moreover, the *Sefer HaChinuch* (Mitzvah 430) emphasizes that the observance of *Shemita* is not merely an agricultural decree but a spiritual discipline, teaching us to care for our eternal inheritance according to Hashem's will. Just as the land rests, so too must the people pause – to renew their relationship with Hashem and with each other. On a practical level, we relinquish ownership of the land during the *Shemita* year, not just conceptually, but in a very tangible way. The produce that grows in “our own backyard” is open for all to take, embodying the concept that the holy land belongs equally to everyone, for it ultimately belongs to G-d alone. I have personally experienced the renewal that comes from surrendering ownership and seeing how land flourishes after its year of rest. It has also instilled in me a deeper connection to the land, as the excitement to once again “get dirt under my fingernails” speaks to a more profound relationship with the earth – a relationship based not on possession but on loving caretaking, humility, and faith.

### Which Mitzvot Engender Compassionate Justice in the Land of Israel?

Another vital connection between the land and the *Mishpatim* is the principle of *Tzedakah* – compassionate justice, which leans toward kindness. The Torah directs us to ensure that all people – especially the poor, the widow, the orphan, and the stranger – are treated with the utmost fairness and compassion:

**ספר שמות פרק כב פסוק כ:**

וְגַר לֹא תוֹנֶה וְלֹא תִלְחָצְנֵנוּ כִּי גֵרִים הֵייתֶם בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם: (כא) כָּל אֶלְמִנָּה וַיְתוּם לֹא תַעֲבֹן:

“You shall not mistreat a convert, nor shall you oppress him, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.”  
You shall not oppress any widow or orphan (*Shemot* 22:20-21).

Caring for the most vulnerable among us – those without a social network – is not merely an abstract ideal; it is an existential, practical reality of life in the Land of Israel. We are called to make a special effort never to exploit those lacking support, whether by underpaying them or being overly controlling and demanding. We must never shame a convert by reminding him of his past or speaking harshly to a widow or orphan. Rather, as practiced in our community in Bat Ayin, we open our homes and hearts to ensure these individuals feel welcome, supported, and cherished. The Torah further reinforces the need to provide for the poor, release debts, and create opportunities for everyone to thrive. The law requiring the return of property during the Jubilee year (*Vayikra* 25:10-16) reflects the profound understanding that land cannot be sold permanently – it ultimately reverts to its divinely appointed owner (*Rashi* on *Vayikra* 25:10). When my husband and I decided to settle in Gush Etzion, we were driven by the desire to live a life fully aligned with Torah values. Over the years, we have witnessed how the mitzvot of justice and kindness form the bedrock of our community. Whether helping a neighbor in need, supporting local agricultural initiatives, or welcoming newcomers, living in *Eretz Yisrael* provides countless opportunities to put the lessons of *Parashat Mishpatim* into practice.

### **How am I Resolving My Quest for Truth and Divine Social Justice in the Land?**

The laws of *Mishpatim*, such as those governing loans and the return of property in the Jubilee year, affirm that the land must be maintained with social justice at its core. Living in this land is not merely a physical reality – it is a spiritual calling that demands commitment to ethical conduct, adherence to G-d’s laws, and deep reverence for the sanctity of the land itself. Without these values, the land risks desecration, and the people risk severing our connection to the divine. Neglecting the poor and the needy is not just a moral failure; it is a violation of the land’s sacred purpose, which was entrusted to the Jewish people to uphold justice and righteousness (*Babylonian Talmud Baba Batra* 8a). For me, the spiritual foundation of building a just and compassionate society in the Land of Israel stands in direct contrast to Marx’s historical materialism. It is not material conditions that shape human history but rather our connection with Hashem – expressed through the fulfillment of His laws in both their spiritual and practical dimensions – that drives true transformation. I am profoundly grateful that my childhood search for a model of social justice rooted in spiritual and moral principles has been fulfilled. Over the years, it has become clear to me that striving to uphold divine law within the land invites the Shechinah to dwell among us, allowing the Holy Land – and in due course, the entire world – to flourish and fulfill its ultimate divine purpose.