



Parashat Mishpatim
Revolution is the Easy Part

by Kerrick Lucker on Friday February 01, 2008

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Exodus 21:1 - 24:18

It's one thing to break down barriers of oppression. It's quite another to build up a community of shared liberation. This is what Moses and the People of Israel are learning in this week's Torah portion, parashat Mishpatim.

A shared sense of community sometimes arises naturally out of shared oppression, but when liberation happens – and we start to experience the brisk wind of real freedom – that sense of community often quickly dissolves. Freedom is hard work. Self-governance is hardest of all. People under the yoke of oppression seldom think about this in the face of all of freedom's obvious benefits, but oddly enough, once you're out in the desert and having to find your own food and make your own laws and mediate your own conflicts, there can be a strange yearning for the old days in *mitzrayim*, the narrow place.

At [Chochmat HaLev](#), the synagogue in the San Francisco Bay Area where I work and worship, there are many different ways that our community members engage with Jewish practice. There is room for any number of different interpretations of Jewish law and tradition by those among us. Some of us observe Jewish laws very closely; others of us would be hard-pressed to recite even a dozen of the 613 *mitzvot*. Still others don't consider themselves Jewish (or do now, but didn't grow up that way). The standards to which we hold ourselves in our covenant with G-d are very different. So how much more do we need to hold ourselves to common agreements about how we treat each other!

There's a lot of fragmenting among LGBT folk. In fact, many people doubt whether we are or should be a community at all. Some of the same people who followed trans women and drag queens into the streets during the Stonewall Riot, and are reaping the benefits of the political liberation movement that followed, now abandon transgender people in a crabs-in-the-barrel scrabble for legal protections that only gender-inclusive legislation can guarantee for all of us. Freedom is seen as a limited commodity, with each group's rights coming at the cost of the others. There is no queer Sanhedrin, which is okay by me, but in the absence thereof those of us who care about community and see these sorts of divisions happening need to sit down with our neighbors and find some common ground. Like it or not, we do have common interests, and



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some agreement about the standards by which we treat each other will help us keep moving forward.

It would be easier if G-d would give the LGBT community, through a queer Moses, one set of laws that we could all agree on, and clear consequences if we don't. G-d enjoys challenging us to do it ourselves, I think. We are a bigger family than the Israelites were as they wandered in the desert after leaving Egypt. We are a family with many more individuals and much more diverse backgrounds and experience. One set of laws about how to behave in our personal lives will not cover us all. So more than ever we need to make agreements with each other to respect, honor, and support each other's diversity, to have compassion for each other, and to treat one another justly.

What does it mean to you to treat others justly? Much of Mishpatim deals with how one treats one's subordinates; at the time, that meant servants indentured to pay off a debt. A parallel situation today is the employee-employer relationship. What are the obligations of an employer to their employees? I'm struck by how many LGBT advocacy organizations don't provide domestic partner benefits or transgender-inclusive health care to their own employees. Does your congregation provide fully-inclusive benefits? And how about how people living in poverty are treated in the the Torah? Many LGBT people give generously to visibly LGBT-related causes (which I am grateful for, as a beneficiary of and contributor to those causes), but it's less well-known that many LGBT people care about other things too. We all need housing, for instance, and transgender-inclusive health care is less than meaningful if few people can afford health care at all. And what does Mishpatim say about how we compensate each other for the hurts we cause? How do we, LGBT Jews, hurt each other? To whom do we owe recompense, and how much?

Considering these things – boring, but vital; frustrating, but rewarding; political and complicated, but heartfelt if we do it right – is part of what it means to build a community. When we have begun to turn our attention from battering at the things that hold us back (not, mind you, that that important work will ever be entirely finished) we look forward, in trepidation and awe, at the task of moving from liberation to freedom. An essential part of that task is making community. Otherwise, there is no “we” to be free.



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