

# Mishpatim @ DC Beit Midrash @ משפטים

Monday, 16 February 2004; 25 Shvat 5764

## Welcome to the DC Beit Midrash!

The *Chumash* (Five Books of Moses) is divided into 54 portions, which Jews read sequentially each week in services. This Shabbat, we will be reading Parashat Mishpatim, from the book of *Sh'mot* (Exodus). Tonight, a member of our community will lead us in a text-study of this portion. The voices of both past and contemporary interpreters will inform our discussion.

Below you will find a summary of this week's Torah portion, along with brief biographies of the commentators cited. The presentation will be followed by *chavruta* (paired) study on a subject of your choice.

משפטים, שינוי כא:א-כד:יה

## ***This week's parasha (Torah portion): Mishpatim, Sh'mot (Exodus) 21:1-24:18***

Parashat Mishpatim presents the mishpatim, "rules" or "laws," that govern the ancient Jewish community. The code of law deals with the treatment of slaves; crimes of murder and kidnaping; personal injuries; damages through neglect or theft; offenses against others through lying, witchcraft, idolatry, oppression, unfair business practices; and unjust treatment by judges. This Torah portion also includes a warning against following others to do evil, along with directives to care for the distressed animals of your enemy and to show impartiality in making judgments. Israelites are reminded to demonstrate sensitivity to the stranger because they were strangers in the land of Egypt. Finally, the portion presents rules for the Sabbath, sabbatical year, Pesach, Shavuot, and Sukkot. Upon hearing all these laws, Moshe gathers the people at Mount Sinai to offer sacrifices and declares, "All the things that God has commanded we will do!"

(Harvey J. Fields, *A Torah Commentary for Our Times*, vol. II., 1993)

## ***Shabbat Shekalim*** שבת שקלים

Resh Lakish said "On the first of Adar, an announcement is made concerning the Shekalim." (Masechet Megillah) The first of the Four Special Shabbatot is Shabbat Parashat Shekalim. It occurs either on the last Shabbat of the month of Shevat, or on the Shabbat which in that year coincides with Rosh Chodesh Adar, or on a Shabbat early in Adar. A special reading, taken from Parshat Ki Tisa (*Sh'mot* 30:11-16) is appended to the regular Torah reading. The reading describes a census of the Jewish People which was taken while the Jews were in the Wilderness, after their Exodus from Egypt. The Torah, here and in other places, teaches that it is forbidden to count Jews in the ordinary manner; rather, the People should be called upon to contribute items, which would then be counted.

(<http://www.ou.org/chagim/fourshabbatot/shekalim.htm>)

## ***This week's sources:***

### ***Mishnah*** משנה

(c. 200 CE)

Coming from the Hebrew word for "repetition," the Mishnah is a compilation of precepts passed down as an oral tradition and collected by Yehudah ha-Nasi (Judah the Prince) in the north of the Israel a little bit more than a century after the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE. The scholars cited in the Mishnah are known as the Tannaim. The Mishnah forms the earlier part of the Talmud.

### ***Rambam, Mishneh Torah***

משנה תורה

(1135-1204)

If one did not know that Rambam (Maimonides) was the name of a man, Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote, one would assume it was the name of a university. The writings and achievements of this twelfth century Jewish sage seem to cover an impossibly large number of activities. Maimonides was the first person to write a systematic code of all Jewish law, the *Mishneh Torah*; he produced one of the great philosophic statements of Judaism, *The Guide to the Perplexed*; published a commentary on the entire *Mishnah*; served as physician to the sultan of Egypt; wrote numerous books on medicine; and, in his spare time, served as leader of Cairo's Jewish community.

Maimonides' major contribution to Jewish life remains the *Mishneh Torah*, his code of Jewish law. His intention was to compose a book that would guide Jews on how to behave in all situations without having to expend large amounts of time. Despite sometimes-intense opposition, the *Mishneh Torah* became a standard guide to Jewish practice, later serving as a model for the *Shulchan Arukh*, the 16th century code of Jewish law that many Jews still regard as authoritative.

([www.us-israel.org/jsource/biography/Maimonides.html](http://www.us-israel.org/jsource/biography/Maimonides.html))

## **Shulhan Arukh** שלחן ערוך

(16<sup>th</sup> cent.)

The legal code known as the Shulhan Arukh, compiled by the great Sephardic rabbi Joseph Caro in the mid 1500s, is still the standard legal code of Judaism. When rabbis, particularly if they are Orthodox, are asked to rule on a question of Jewish law, the first volume they consult generally is the Shulhan Arukh. A major reason for its universal acceptance is that it was the first code to list the differing customs and laws of both Sephardic and Ashkenazic Jewry. (Maimonides's earlier *Mishneh Torah*, for example, contained only the legal rulings of Sephardic Jewry, which differed in certain areas from European Jewry's practices.) This unique feature was not intended by Joseph Caro, but came about through a happy coincidence. At the very time that Caro was compiling his code, a similar undertaking was being planned by Rabbi Moses Isserles of Poland. Isserles, known in Jewish life as the Rama, was thrown into some despair when he first heard about Caro's work, for he knew Caro to be a greater scholar than himself. Nonetheless, he soon realized that both Caro's legal code and his own would not by themselves meet the needs of all Jews. Thus, the *Shulhan Arukh* was published with Caro's rulings listed first, and Isserles's dissents and addenda included in italics.

The *Shulhan Arukh* is divided into four volumes:

1. *Orach Hayyim*-laws of prayer and of holidays.
2. *Yoreh Deah*-diverse laws, including those governing charity (tzedaka), Torah study and the Jewish dietary laws.
3. *Even haEzer*-laws concerning Jewish marriage and divorce.
4. *Choshen Mishpat*-Jewish civil law.

(adapted from [http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org:80/jsource/Judaism/shulhan\\_arukh.html](http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org:80/jsource/Judaism/shulhan_arukh.html))

## **Sefer Hahinukh** ספר החינוך

(13<sup>th</sup> cent.)

13th century work from Spain that lists and explains the 613 commandments. It is attributed to Rabbi Aharon HaLevi of Barcelona, though this is disputed. The description of each commandment includes (a) the concept of the Mitzvah and its Biblical source, (b) the philosophical underpinnings of the commandment, and (c) a brief summary of the laws governing its observance. An English translation of this important work is available.

(adapted from <http://www.hillel.org/Hillel/NewHille.nsf/0/22570441277dce8385256942007582d8?OpenDocument>)

## **The Gospel according to Mark**

(60–80 C.E.)

The Gospel of Mark is the second Gospel in the New Testament, though, based on the most commonly accepted solution to the synoptic problem, it is generally believed to have been the first to be written. Out of a total of 662 verses, Mark has 406 in common with Matthew and Luke, 145 with Matthew, 60 with Luke, and at most 51 peculiar to itself. It is the shortest of the gospels. The Passion narrative comprises 40 percent of Mark.

The description in this Gospel of how the Sanhedrin (the Jewish authorities) plotted to try and execute Jesus has been used to promote and condone anti-Semitism.

(adapted from [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gospel\\_of\\_Mark](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gospel_of_Mark) and from <http://www.britannica.com/>)

### ***This week's teacher:***

#### **Jeremy Kadden**

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Jeremy Kadden is a Research Assistant at the American Enterprise Institute. He would love to discuss this stuff more, and can be reached at [jeremykadden@hotmail.com](mailto:jeremykadden@hotmail.com).

### ***This week's food sponsor:***

**Michelle Sternthal**, in honor of the DC Beit Midrash.

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