

D'var Torah on Mishpatim

Sisterhood Shabbaton-- February 2, 2019

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*Pirkei Avot* says "Turn it and turn it, for everything is in it." Since I have given a *D'var Torah* on *Parashat Mishpatim* before, I thought I'd turn it to try to find a different angle, and I'm going to start by asking you a question. It is not a trick question, and there is no right or wrong answer, but I'd like you to think about it and answer it in your own mind. The question is "Why are you here today?" In this rain, no less.

I can come up with many reasons, and I imagine some are similar to yours: force of habit, this is what we do on Shabbat morning, we come to shul. For my sister Clara, being in shul makes her feel the spirit of Shabbat, a separation in time from the rest of the week. Many of us are here today because it is Sisterhood Shabbaton. You may be here because a friend invited you, or to say *kaddish* or to celebrate a *simha*, or to give thanks for recovering from an illness, or to pray for health, or because you are sad and your soul yearns for healing. What are the common threads? We are here to be in community, but also to satisfy our individual needs.

How do the concepts of community and the individual relate to *Parashat Mishpatim*, which sets forth many laws, given more than 3,000 years ago and which we still read today, year after year? What meaning do these laws have for us?

I want to pause to remember our dear friend Dee Dee Quinn, and you'll see why in a moment. Dee Dee passed away recently and left a big void in our lives. She was a past Sisterhood president, editor of the Sisterhood newsletter for many years, and gave beautiful sermons at our Shabbatons, without notes, may I add. Some years ago, on a day like today, Dee Dee talked about OnStar, the car system that helps when you have difficulties while on the road. I Googled OnStar, and to my surprise, it's still around. Dee Dee referred to the Torah as our OnStar. Just as OnStar is there to help someone who has encountered difficulties along their journey, so is the Torah here to help us. Instead of pressing a button to get help, all we need to do is go to our Jewish sources, or talk to our rabbis or to God.

Getting back to why we should relate to the laws we read in *Mishpatim*, I think it is because these laws help us live in community. They establish boundaries and guide our actions. Some people question whether some of these laws from long ago are still applicable, or should be modified, but that is part of an ongoing conversation and is what we Jews are known for: we ask questions and we debate. Dee Dee said the Torah is our OnStar. Our task is to engage in the conversation.

Besides giving us many laws, *Parashat Mishpatim* contains the words *na'aseh v'nishmah*, well-known and the subject of much commentary. I want to look at these words through the lens of community and the individual. *Na'aseh* calls us to action. The Torah guides us to behave in certain ways towards each other in community. *Nishmah* (from the same root as *shema*) means listening or understanding. After we act, we internalize the action. Our actions evoke feelings in us, which brings us back to the individual. After we act, we feel happy, or proud or satisfied with what we did, or sad, or regretful or ashamed. The Torah is wise. It helps us achieve a balance between our inner self and the outer world and advances our goal to achieve peace or *shalom*, *sh'lemut* or completeness.

To come full circle with the concepts of community and the individual, I want to celebrate my Sisterhood sisters. While helping us to achieve individual goals, our community of sisters provides warmth and caring to each other in times of happiness and sorrow. I am proud to be a part of this community and I salute my sisters for all you do and for serving as role models in keeping Judaism alive. We are the link that binds the generations, and I love you. Shabbat Shalom.