Parashat Mishpatim
It's all about the Vav – the power of AND
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Based on a teaching by Arthur Lavinsky

Last week we read Parashat Yitro, which contained the celebrated "Ten Commandments". We did a text study exploring why the 10 commandments have been both celebrated and downplayed in the synagogue service. Do you stand or sit for them? Should we recite them every day?

At the core was the concern that there would be among the non-Jews who look for any reason to criticize Judaism the wrong impression that we only care about 10 of the 613 commandments. AND a concern amongst our own Jewish adherents that they too might mistakenly believe that it is only those ten precepts which we must meticulously observe.

This week we read from Parashat Mishpatim, which teaches us that there are many other Mitzvot which also obligate us as Jews to live our lives in accordance with God's will.

The portion begins VE'eyleh Hamishpatim. I emphasize the "VE" (Vav) because that is the letter which means AND – "And these are the laws".

Of all the letters in the Hebrew alphabet – the Vav, the second smallest letter after the tiny YUD is the most powerful. The VAV is the connector, like people who are connectors, the VAV brings two sometimes seemingly unrelated things together.

In this week's Torah portion the powerful little VAV works its magic of connection twice in very important ways.

The first is in the very beginning of the parasha were we read, "*VE'eyleh Hamishpatim/And these are the laws".*

The classic commentaries note that "AND" is used here to teach us "Just as those laws (the Ten Commandments) were given at Mount Sinai, so were these laws." By THESE laws vav means to include the entire rest of the commandments in the Torah. Everything, not only those that come after but even those that came before, these and these and those and those.

In this parasha alone there are 53 of the 613 commandments in Mishpatim, mostly dealing with mundane matters – laws regarding how we treat fellow human beings, laws of damages, breaking and

entering, how one treats servants, laws about lending money to others, etc. They are no less important for us to observe than the "Top 10"

Many years ago, I dealt with a congregant, a woman, who was troubled by a seemingly observant sister who mistreated her. The sister had defrauded her parents of money, spread rumors about her, and made her life quite miserable. The congregant said that she felt guilty about talking to her about these things because she seemed so pious – the sister meticulously observed Shabbat and Kashrut and sent her children to Yeshivot (Orthodox Jewish Day Schools). I explained that someone who does the things that her sister does cannot be considered pious. She may be outwardly observant about ritual requirements, but Judaism demands that we should be just as mindful about how we treat fellow human

beings as we are about our Mitzvot that focus our attention on God. The Mitzvot are both vertical, in that many of the commandments are “Bein Adam Lamakom” (Between wo/man and God), and others are horizontal Mitzvot “Bein Adam Lechaveiro” (Between ourselves and fellow human beings).

It is not enough to be right with God and wrong with people. Nor is it enough to be right with people and wrong with God. Our faith demands that we observe ALL of the Mitzvot to the best of our ability, and that we leave neither God nor our fellow human beings out of the equation.

The second instance of the power of the vav, the power of AND occurs a bit later in the parasha when the Israelites are presented with the covenant and the whole Torah.

In perhaps the first and last instance in Jewish history where a Jewish lawyer was not present, Moses reads the Israelites the brit, the contract between God and the Jewish people and they respond.

Na'aseh V'Nishma, "We will do and we will listen." Essentially meaning we will do all that you command us to do, and we will study the details later.

The sages must have been aware of just how strange this expression sounded to their contemporaries. A story is told of a Sadducee who criticized Rabbi Zeira for swimming across the Jordan rather than waiting for a boat to take him to the Promised Land: "Hasty people, you put your mouths before your ears, you are still, as ever, clinging to your hastiness." For

contemporary Jews, we are also mystified by this expression. We are more likely to say: “I’ll listen to what you have to suggest and then I’ll consider if I am going to do it.”

Why is this AND so powerful?

Often in life, behavior precedes intellectual comprehension; our actions take precedence over our understanding.

It’s been my personal experience that you cannot learn to live a Jewish life in a classroom. In fact, all attempts at Jewish education since the first days of Hebrew school have failed for this one critical flaw. If you or students do not practice what you preach or teach, then its incompressible. Its an academic

exercise when what is attempted to be conveyed is a matter of the heart and the soul.

Jewish living only begins to make sense when we experience it personally. With action comes understanding. This is true about life in general.

I once took an Israel friend to a baseball game. I spent the 2-hour drive to the game explaining the rules of the game, how balls and strikes and outs work. I even tried to explain the infield fly rule.

He was lost – and bored out of his mind I am sure. But when we got to the game and he saw why a player had to run to first base, how the pressure changes if you have two strikes, or 3 balls. He understood, he was still bored out of his mind, but he understood!

Judaism is about understanding AND doing – to be Jewish you have to do Jewish, AND for it to mean anything you have to know why you do or don't do what you do as a Jew..

Judaism is a little like winning the lottery. I may not win the lottery every time I buy a ticket, but I definitely can't win if I never buy a lottery ticket. Will I hear God's voice every time I do Jewish? Probably not – maybe not most of the time. But like our ancestors, only when we do Jewish will we ever have a chance of experiencing the joy and meaning in Judaism. In the doing we hear God's voice, in the why we hear our own. Those two voices together, our's and G-d's we call that prayer, a sacred conversation.

Someone once asked me, “Rabbi, which Mitzvot are more important – the rituals or the ethics?” As rabbis are known to do, I answered with my own question “Which is more important if one wants to live – to eat or to breathe?” The answer, of course, was obviously. We need to do both. If one eats yet cannot breathe, one will die. And the same is true for someone who breathes but has nothing to eat. As humans we need to eat AND breathe. Similarly, as Jews we only live fully when both Jewish ethics AND rituals become part of our daily routines.

Let’s remember what the rabbis taught us. All of the Mitzvot, not just the Ten Commandments, can be linked to Sinai. Don’t forget what the VAV teaches us, this AND this. It’s all about the VAV!