

So Many *Mitzvot*, So Little Time

Shabbat Mishpatim 5782

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According to the tradition that the Torah includes 613 commandments, over fifty are in this week's portion, *Parashat Mishpatim*.ⁱ Rabbi Gunther Plaut wrote that the portion "appears to be a self-contained law code. It presents a collection of civil and criminal laws, followed by cultic (ritual and worship-related) provisions."ⁱⁱ

Some of the laws are irrelevant—or worse, anathema—to us, regulating slavery. Others provide valuable lessons. For example, we learn that the owner of a habitually aggressive ox is responsible for the beast's actions,ⁱⁱⁱ much as we would say, "The dog bites once, shame on the dog. The dog bites again, shame on you!" The portion also includes worthy ordinances about providing for the poor and needy before quickly pivoting to commandments that we observe Shabbat and the festivals.

If this Torah portion teaches us anything, it is that God expects much of us. Not only must we avoid unethical and immoral behavior, but we are also enjoined to go out of our way to return lost items that we have found. Then, we must find a way to adapt the commandment that our ancient Israelites present offerings on Sukkot, Passover, and Shavuot.

This morning, our congregant Lee Harris wrote a Facebook post that spoke to my concern about this portion, and I cite it with his permission. Sharing two paintings he made last night, Lee wrote that one is called "anxiety;" the other, "community." Lee explains: "Both have to do with the pandemic. I LOVE LOVE LOVE how many opportunities have opened up to connect with the Jewish community online. I feel frustrated missing out on so many in-person events since this started, but I'm grateful for technology. I've also connected with a lot of amazing Jews over these years online. I made 'anxiety' ... because as much as I love making these connections, I do feel overwhelmed sometimes with the amount of events there are online."^{iv}

In short, Lee expresses discomfort about not having the time or energy to perform all the *mitzvot* offered to him.

We could all become overwhelmed, and not only by Jewish obligations. Whether the demands are external—the expectations of employers, schools, or even family—or internal, our own drive to do and to achieve, many of us have far more to do than we have the time to do it. That’s true even if we aren’t like Lee, a home-school parent of three.

This morning, my son Daniel sent me a letter that he had received, telling him that he had made the Dean’s list. That was not a surprise, since I already knew that Daniel made straight A’s, all while taking leadership roles in Hillel’s Reform *chavurah*, leading a campaign to continue composting on campus, advocating for J Street U, traveling with the mock trial team, and pledging a fraternity. I am extraordinarily proud of Daniel’s achievements, but I’m exhausted just listing them, knowing that I’m leaving out plenty. Recognizing that many parents would happily trade problems with me, I find myself asking Daniel: “Do you have to do all that? Isn’t it too much? Do you have time to have fun?” His response is to take an overloaded class schedule this semester! (Admittedly, he does have fun.)

Last week, the New York *Times* published an opinion essay by my colleague, Rabbi Elliot Kukla, entitled, “The Most Valuable Thing I Can Teach My Kid Is How to Be Lazy.” Rabbi Kukla, echoing Lee Harris, writes: “America in 2022 is an exhausting place to live. We’re tired of answering work emails after dinner. We’re tired of caring for senior family members in a crumbling elder care system, of worrying about a mass shooting at our children’s schools. We’re tired of unprocessed grief and untended-to illness and depression. We’re tired of wildfires becoming a fact of life in the West, of floods and hurricanes hitting the South and East. We’re really tired of this unending pandemic. Most of all, we are exhausted by trying to keep going as if everything is fine.”^v

One way or another, most of us can relate. Working parents have been on overdrive for two years, with less in-person school, less childcare, and a bevy of weighty decisions about how to balance normalcy with protecting their children’s health. Just when we thought that vaccine approval for ages five and up was going to relieve that burden, Omicron hit, and with it, people who had been careful and stayed well throughout the pandemic started to fall ill. Our healthcare professionals are stressed beyond comprehension. Testimonies of nurses and physicians are gut-wrenching. Economists don’t seem to know how significant “the Great Resignation” will ultimately be, but the simple fact that tens of thousands of

Americans are talking about leaving the workforce is noteworthy, because they **want** to stop working.

Rabbi Kukla notes, “Shunning laziness is integral to the American dream. The Puritans who colonized New England believed that laziness led to damnation... This view has endured in American culture. Hundreds of years later, working to the point of self-harm to build the boss’s wealth is still lauded as a ‘a good work ethic’ in America.”^{vi}

Rabbi Kukla admits that only his “privilege ...allows [him] to teach [his] child to be lazy. Many people in this country and elsewhere spend all their time working, some holding multiple jobs. Many still struggle to afford housing and food. For too many, laziness is not an option. But rest should not be a luxury; our time belongs to us and is not inherently a commodity. Reclaiming our time is an act of sovereignty over our lives, deserved by everyone.”^{vii}

If Rabbi Kukla were writing for his Jewish community, rather than the *New York Times*, he might have said that each of us shares sovereignty over our lives with God. He might have pointed to a single verse found in the midst of a flurry of “thou shalt” and “thou shalt not” in this week’s Torah portion: “Six days you shall do your work, but on the seventh day, you shall cease from labor, in order that your ox and your ass may rest, and that your homeborn slave and the stranger may be refreshed.”^{viii}

The commandment to observe Shabbat is repeated many times in the Torah, so we may wonder about its specific function here. In the middle of so many *mitzvot*, God seems to acknowledge that much, perhaps too much, has been commanded. People will need a break. We all do.

Let us acknowledge, as God does, that we have many *mitzvot* to perform in this lifetime, much good work to do. And let us affirm, too, that none of us is commanded to deplete ourselves in the process. Rest, too, is a *mitzvah*. For everyone. Rich and poor, young and old. Let us all take some time to be “lazy.” Then, may we be refreshed.

Amen.

ⁱ *Sefer HaChinuch* lists 53 *mitzvot* in *Mishpatim*, while Rambam lists 51.

ⁱⁱ W. Gunther Plaut, Ed., *The Torah: A Modern Commentary, Revised Edition*, New York: Union for Reform Judaism, 2005, p. 511.

ⁱⁱⁱ Exodus 21:29.

^{iv} Lee Harris, Facebook post, January 28, 2022.

^v Elliot Kukla, “The Most Valuable Thing I Can Teach My Kid Is How to Be Lazy,” *The New York Times*, January 20, 2022.

^{vivi} Kukla.

^{vii} Kukla.

^{viii} Exodus 23:12.