

## A MATTER OF PRINCIPLES

### A Devotional Meditation on Mishpatim (Ordinances)

Exodus 21:1-24:18; Jeremiah 31:31-34, 33:25-26, 34:8-22;  
Romans 11:28-29; 1 Corinthians 13:9-10

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A society needs a single standard of right conduct in order to operate. Members must understand what is expected of them so they can contribute their part to keeping the society healthy. That is the same whether it is a fraternity, a church, a neighborhood, a people group, or a nation state. It is these shared values that enable a society to provide correction and instruction to its children so they can become contributing members when they come of age.

We can't do that, however, if we don't have a common understanding of the society's values and the principles by which it lives out those values. How can we train our children in the way they should go if we don't even know what that way is? Even if we have a common standard, we get into trouble if we simply assume our neighbors share that standard, or overestimate our own knowledge of it. In the United States, for example, our standard is in the Declaration of Independence which established our Union, and the Constitution which created a more perfect Union based on the principles articulated in the Declaration. School children and immigrants are supposed to learn these basic documents so that can know how to be contributing members of American society. If that doesn't happen, then over time the sublime truths of our foundational documents get reduced to slogans and bywords that no one really understands, but they still use them to justify their own actions and criticize the actions of others.

The same is true of God's people, both Christians and Jews, whose foundational document is the Bible. The authoritative scripture we have in common, or at least proclaim to have in common, is the Ten Commandments. Those are the principles of right conduct in God's society of the redeemed. Immediately after God spoke those words, He gave instructions to Moses about how those principles were to be lived out. His instructions about slaves and bondservants and bridal price are foreign to our post-modern, post-industrial ears, but they made sense in the agrarian world of the Bronze Age. Jewish scholars through the ages have continuously evaluated, argued over, and prayed through those ancient instructions to come to terms with how they might be applied in contemporary society.

Here's an example. Cycles of seven days and seven years are important to God. He says in Exodus 21:2 that a Hebrew bondservant is to serve for six years, and go free in the seventh. Then He explains what happens to the land every seven years, and what happens to society as a whole every seven days:

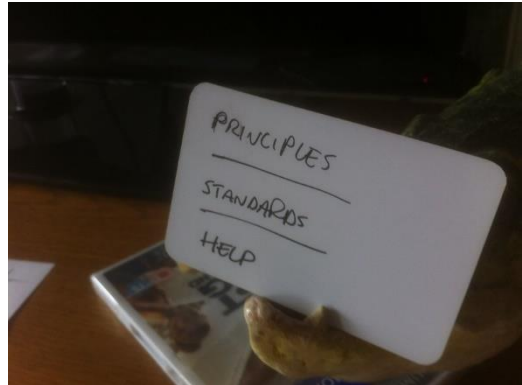


Photo by Ben Terret, February 14, 2013, [via Flickr](#).

For six years you are to sow your land and gather the increase. But during the seventh year you are to let it rest and lie fallow, so that the poor among your people may eat. Whatever they leave behind, the animals of the field may eat. You are to deal with your vineyard and your olive grove in the same way.

You are to do your work for six days, but on the seventh day you will rest, so that your ox and your donkey may have rest, and also the son of your handmaid and the outsider may be refreshed.

Exodus 23:10-12 TLV

I recently enjoyed a study session with a rabbi who has written a book about this seven-year cycle and the fifty-year Jubilee cycle which also is part of God's rhythm for His land and people.\* Among the questions the rabbi raises is whether societies in this age can implement the release from debt and servitude, as well as rest the land. How would we do that when our economic model is based on financial trading and abstract assets rather than human labor and tangible assets? There are proposals, but so far no comprehensive answers even in Israel, which, of course, remains a secular state operating within the Western model rather than the Torah. Even so, it's comforting to know that there are serious Jewish thinkers wrestling with these issues, just as there are serious Christian thinkers wrestling with biblical issues according to our understanding of God's requirements for His people. The best thing that could happen for all of us is to collaborate so we can share our learning and together seek God's guidance for how to live out His unchanging principles of human interaction.

Some might insist that God is finished with the Jews, so there's nothing we can learn from them. That's not what Paul says, as we understand from passages like this:

Concerning the Good News, they [Israel] are hostile for your sake; but concerning chosenness, they are loved on account of the fathers—for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable.

Romans 11:28-29 TLV

The Jewish people are still chosen of God regardless what we or even they may think. It's not up to them; they can't make themselves "unchosen" any more than we can declare them out of God's will. Paul tells us it's on account of the fathers Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God made His irrevocable covenants with them even though they failed in their lifetimes in rather spectacular ways. It didn't depend on them, but on God. He was determined to have a people precious to Himself who would eventually proclaim His redemption, glorify His name, and draw all nations to Him. That's why He declared this astounding promise at the very time that judgment, destruction, and exile was coming on the Jewish nation in the form of the Babylonian conquest:

Thus says *Adonai*: "If I have not made My covenant of day and night firm, and the fixed patterns ordering the heavens and earth, only then would I reject the offspring of Jacob, and of My servant David so that I would not take from his offspring rulers over the offspring of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. For I will restore them from their exile, and have compassion on them."

Jeremiah 33:25-26 TLV

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\* Aharon Ariel Lavi, *Seven: Shmita Inspired Social and Economic Ideas* (Tel Aviv: Contento Now, 2022).

The fact that the Jewish people did return from Babylon, or at least a remnant returned, and the fact that they have returned again after the exile imposed by Rome tells us that God isn't done with this people. That's a good thing. For nearly two thousand years, we Christians have learned much from the scriptures handed down to us by our Jewish brethren – both the ancient prophets who wrote in Hebrew, and the Jewish apostles who wrote in Greek. We've missed a lot, though, just like American children who haven't been taught the foundational principles of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. There's a whole Kingdom of material out there for us to study, and there are Jewish sages now reaching out to help us learn it.

Another thing Paul taught was that we know in part and prophesy in part, but the partial will pass away when the perfect has come. It's a process that will be complete only after Messiah returns, but that process is well advanced right now. It's happening as Christians and Jews freely and respectfully share what they know in view of the time when we no longer have to exhort one another to know the LORD, because we shall all know Him.