Torah from a Mussar Perspective
***Parshat Mishpatim* – Exodus 21:1-24:18**
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As I have mentioned along the way, this year I am serving as Interim Rabbi of the congregation I served in Jackson, Mississippi in the late 1980's-early-90's. It has made for an exhilarating and busy year – certainly as I travel South once each month to be "in-residence" for a period of time. So much has changed in Jackson since our family left in early summer 1992. One change is that there is actually a bonafide bagel shop. In my day, we had to travel 200 miles, either north to Memphis, or south to New Orleans to find bagels.

As I began studying this week's portion last week, I was sitting in that bagel shop waiting to have coffee with a colleague and friend. The shop is in a shopping plaza which was very much a part of our life during my years in Jackson. Indeed, one end of the plaza was anchored by the Olde Tyme Deli – a Jewish style deli and bakery, owned by members of the congregation. Their children and grandchildren are still very present in my community today.

Sitting at a table, looking out the window, I noticed some words across the courtyard high on a wall. I honestly don't know if the words were there when I lived in town. I probably never sat with a view at that angle in those years. However, sitting with a *Mussar sefer* on the table before me and eyeing the words I could not help but feel a resonance from above. The words on the wall read, "Carry kindness in your heart." Now Jackson is known as the "buckle of the Bible belt." So meaningful verses and sayings abound. However, sitting with my *Mussar sefer* studying *Parshat Mishpatim* anew, I could not help but be struck that I was being guided to a particular verse and value in our *parshah*.

In Exodus 22:24 we are taught:

אִם־כֶּסֶף תַּלְוֶה אֶת־עַמִּי אֶת־הֶעָנִי עִמָּךְ לֹא־תִהְיֶה לוֹ כְּנֹשֶׁה לֹא־תְשִׂימוּן עָלָיו נֶשֶׁךְ׃

> If you lend money to My people, to the poor among you, do not act toward them as a creditor; exact no interest from them.

In *Ohr Ha-Nefesh*, Rabbi Chaim Ephraim Zaitchik[1] begins his teaching by referring to Rashi's comment on this verse. Citing *Midrash Tanhuma,* Rashi focuses on the words - *et he-ani imackh* – "the poor among you" and he states, "Look at yourself as though you are that poor person."[2]

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[1] Rabbi Chaim Ephraim Zaitchik (1905-1989) was of the greatest Mussar Movement rabbis of the 20th century. He was a disciple of the Novardok Yeshivot and founded the Novardok Yeshivah in Buchach (Galicia). During World War II he lived in Siberia, and afterwards emigrated to the United States, where he started printing Mussar books. In 1960 he made *aliya* to Israel.

[2] *Midrash Tanchuma* 6:15.

Rav Zaitchik teaches,

> There are people who do [good] deeds artfully and with great self-sacrifice out of *yir'at shamayim*/awe of Heaven, and in order to fulfill a *mitzvah*. However, [inevitably] some portion of one's effort [even if done to fulfill a] *mitzvah* may be deficient. This [can be true] even when one is fulfilling a *mitzvah* such as to lend [to others] and to dispense *hesed*/lovingkindness towards one's fellow with a *lev tov*/good heart.
>
> However, one must take care that their fulfillment of the *mitzvah* is not connected with whispers (hints) of derision, nor [looking down at the other with a sense they may be] inferior.[3]

Even when we are fulfilling a *mitzvah* with the best of intentions, the reality is that we are fallible human beings. Even the best among us may, at times, find our thoughts turning from the positive to some negative aspect, even without intention. This is a part of our human condition, what some call "monkey-mind" where our thoughts run away. Rav Zaitchik is teaching us that this is something we must see clearly and channel ourselves to overcome.

He teaches,

> If, while fulfilling the *mitzvah* of *gemilut hasadim*/deeds of loving-kindness, one [allows thoughts or feelings of superiority to creep in] then such a person is not fulfilling the *mitzvah* of *gemilut hasadim* with *shleymut*/wholeness.
>
> [This is] on account of a lack of *hishtat-fut b'tza'ar chaveyro* – failing to "participate in the troubles of one's fellow."[4]

The notion that we should strive to be wholehearted in our fulfillment of *mitzvot*, especially as relates to *mitzvot* in which our deeds impact on others immediately reminds me of the *middah* of *nose'a b'ol im chaveyro* – bearing the burden with our fellow. As we know, the is a primary focus of Rabbi Simcha Zissel Ziv, the Alter of Kelm, who teaches, "Our Sages taught: One of the methods by which the Torah is acquired is by carrying the burden of our fellow."[5] The Alter also instructs us: "To reach the level of being one who bears the burden of one's fellow is impossible unless one has accustomed themselves to love one's neighbor in thought and deed."[6]

As I reflect on the Alter's teaching along with that of Rav Zaitchik, I see in the latter's teaching a call for an additional level of awareness towards which we should strive as we work at fulfilling

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[3] Rabbi Chaim Ephraim Zaitchik, *Ohr Ha-Nefesh,* volume 1*,* page 397.
[4] Some of this rendering of Rav Zaitchik's teaching is as interpreted by Rabbi Moshe Igbui in *Chochmat HaMatzpun*, volume 5, page 488.
[5] *Chochmah U-Mussar*,
[6] Ibid.

the *mitzvot.* We must strive for awareness of where our heart, mind,, and soul are, as we fulfill a *mitzvah*. To be sure we should strive to be *shaleym* – wholehearted as we fulfill a *mitzvah beyn Adam la-Makom* – between us and the Holy One. This is no less true when we are fulfilling a *mitzvah* such as the one presented in Exodus 22:24 – "If you lend money to My people, to the poor among you, do not act toward them as a creditor; exact no interest from them."

Rav Zaitchik reminds us that how we fulfill a *mitzvah* is as important as fulfilling it. If we are not careful, our demeanor can weaken the essence of our act. I am always striving to be aware (and sometimes failing) to maintain awareness that the other person, for whom I might be extending myself with an act of *hesed*, or in any other way, is a reflection of *Tzelem Elohim* – the image of God. If I allow resentment or bitter feelings to color my act, it diminishes not only my *shleymut*/wholeness, but potentially the impact of my deed, even as I strive to assist them. Rav Zaitchik adds this dimension of *hishtat-fut b'tza'ar chaveyro* – "[actively] participating in the troubles of one's fellow" to our soul curriculum.

We might be inclined to see this as empathy – not just helping another bear their burden but feeling the *tza'ar*/trouble with them. If we can put ourselves in their position, and try to feel with them, it may even help us strengthen our acts of helping them bear the burden. From my seat at the table in Jackson, the words, "Carry kindness in your heart" struck me as a very visual reminder of the lesson I was learning from Rav Zaitchik!

FOR FOCUS:

- Can you think of an occasion when you were fully engaged in fulfilling a *mitzvah*, yet your heart, mind and/or soul were elsewhere?
- How can you make sure that in the process of fulfilling a *mitzvah* or performing an act of *hesed,* you are fully present and engaged in the act you are performing?
- Which *middah* (or *middot*) can help you achieve such presence and focus?