

A Brief Note on Moses, the Master Teacher

The hierarchical structure of judges suggested by *Yitro* and developed around the rule of ten, would have helped surmount one of the largest obstacles facing Moses – communication. With the pronouncement of the Ten Commandments and the promulgation of the civil and criminal legislation recorded in *Parsha Mishpatim*, laws meant to govern social and economic relationships, the challenge was not so much to convince the people to accept them, but rather to understand them.

There was hardly anything unique about many of the laws recorded in the Torah. Many of the societies that were contemporaries of the early Israelites also promoted laws that dealt with murder and assault, indentured servants, and gave property and commercial protections. The most renowned example would be the Code of Hammurabi, a legal codification from ancient Babylon created ca. 1760 BCE. Egypt too had a form of a justice system. However, slaves were excluded from the laws application.

The Torah is notably bereft of any detailed description of the Children of Israel, and it is fair to infer that after centuries of living under oppressive conditions, working as labourers for various civic projects, they were surely not a learned group nor would they have had a sophisticated awareness of anything outside their immediate plight. The basic laws given by God, the Ten Statements (*Aseret HaDibrot*) are fairly straightforward. Don't kill, don't steal, don't commit adultery are stark declaratives. The laws promulgated in *Mishpatim* are more complex and reflective of a far different society, one completely outside of the Israelites' frame of reference. It is doubtful that the Israelites had the social awareness to appreciate their intended purpose. It is difficult to imagine their reaction to the news that slavery was lawful, intrinsic in the law of the bondsmen found at the beginning of the *Parsha*, or their having a mercantile appreciation of the laws of bailment.

Some of the provisions described in the *Parsha* are not laws as much as they are statements of moral precepts and principles; for example, the axiomatic prohibition against taking advantage of the less fortunate of society: "*You shall not afflict any widow or fatherless child*". Some of the laws had as their objective the continued integrity of a justice system: "*Do not accept a false report; do not extend your hand with the wicked to be a venal witness*". Again, these ideas and their underlying social philosophies would have been beyond the immediate grasp of these former slaves.

At the pinnacle of this broad hierarchy of judges stood Moses whose task was *to make known the decrees of God and His teachings*.¹ Moses is frequently referred to as "*Moshe Rabbeinu*", our "Master," or "Teacher," and it fell to him to explain the spirit and intent of the various laws. He was unique among the Israelites, because he was not one of them; he was a product of Egyptian civilization and not of a slave culture. Moreover, he was raised in the Royal Court and presumably he was exposed to ideas of commerce and learning. He would have been aware of matters dealt with in the Egyptian court: trade and commerce, division of property and economic systems. Only he had the knowledge necessary to let other people understand that which God had decreed.

Parsha Mishpatim, February 1, 2008

ⁱ *Parsha Yitro*, Exodus 18:16