

Parshat Mishpatim: Being in love – Being committed

As a Rabbi one of my biggest honors and pleasures is the possibility of performing weddings, and because of that I have had the privilege of speaking to many couples and share with them the excitement of preparing the ceremony. I use to invite the couple to my office and usually we spend a lot of time in that preparation, I ask them to share with me about their history, how did they meet, we try to make the ceremony as personal as possible, to include personal details, to choose the melodies that they like, we make rehearsals, etc, etc... We invest several hours trying to make the ceremony the most important moment in the couple's life.

And sometimes it happens to me, that in the middle of this planning stage, when I explain to the couple that the ceremony itself lasts for no more than 25 or 30 minutes, they are surprised of the fact that we invest so much time in a very short ceremony... Only 25 minutes?? And when this happens I give to them two explanations: The first one is the obvious one, that for Judaism the wedding ceremony is something very important and everything should be perfect, and that demands a lot of preparations. But at the same time there is a much deeper lesson here, and it is that even though the ceremony should be very important, much more important is how the couple translates the emotions and feelings of the ceremony in the life that they are going to start living now as a family. It is like saying to them: Invest enough time in celebration, that is very important of course, but don't forget about the second task: As you are enjoying now, you have the mission of being able to enjoy every day, and that is the most difficult challenge.

So the question then is: We know how to prepare a wedding ceremony (and also the party), there are even professionals that can do it perfectly (it may take time, but is not difficult), but how do we assure that the couple will continue sharing love and companionship through their whole life? And even though I am not an expert (let's say that we are "in the process"), but at least the way I understand it is that we have to learn to transform the emotions of the beginning, the feelings and happiness of what was represented in the perfect day of the wedding celebration, into daily steps, concrete steps, which can assure the couple a life of continuous happiness and companionship. So it is not, actually, about feeling or emotions, it is about what we do in a daily basis, in order to express those feelings.

And I wanted to share this lesson with you today because I think it can be a good metaphor to understand what is happening this week with our Torah portion. Last week we read about the most important, mystic and sublime moment of our history, when God meet the people of Israel at Mount Sinai sealing his covenant and giving us the 10 commandment. According to our rabbis we can think of what happened at Sinai as our "wedding ceremony" with God. It was perfect: Moses in the top of Mount Sinai, thunders, clouds, special effects, God saying to us how much he loves and cares for us, and we saying to Him: We are committed with you and we will take care of our relationship.

But after reading in the Torah last week about that incredible “ceremony”, one week after we meet again the Torah and we find a completely different atmosphere: In our weekly reading of Mishpatim we realize that its content is devoted almost to laws: You have to do this and this, behave in this way and this way. Don’t do this to your brother, help him with his animal, lend him money when he needs it, don’t treat badly your servants, etc, etc, etc. It is a compendium, a codex of laws and regulations. So making a comparison between the last Parsha and today, we can say that Parashat Mishpatim is the absolute “anti-climax” of the last week’s reading: From a so mystical experience, we move now to a long list of law that regulates how we have to behave toward God, but mostly toward other human beings.

And following the metaphor of the wedding ceremony, we can think God is saying now to us: Now that we celebrated our commitment in Mount Sinai, we cannot stop there, we need to assure we will maintain this commitment forever through concrete steps, regulations, laws, so we will be able to preserve our love and our relationship forever. Romanticism is important but we cannot stop there. We have to translate romanticism in real love, and for that purpose we need to take it to practice transforming emotions and feelings to deeds, concrete action. If not, the relationship won’t last.

Real meaning in life, a rich life, will come not because of mystical experiences: It will come when we learn how to transform those experiences in real life, through concrete steps.

This is an important characteristic of Judaism as a religion: We are a religious tradition who places God in the centre. We know that our mission in life is to transform every moment, every second, in a possibility to connect to the Supreme so we can transcend ourselves. We try to imitate God because every human being has a divine spark in him or herself.

But at the same time, we are a religion of Law: We have mitzvot, 613 commandments that say to us: Do this and don’t do this, eat in this way and do not eat pork or not mix meat and milk. Pray three times a day in this specific time. Honor your father and your mother doing this and this. Give between 10 to 20 percent of your income for tzedaka (charity). Put on Tefillin every morning. Almost everything is regulated! It is what we call Halacha, Jewish law, which comes from the root “h-l-ch” (“to walk” in Hebrew). Jewish law is walking through a way of concrete and predetermined deeds of righteousness, because through it we will assure we can maintain our relationship and commitment to God.

We have to admit that there are Jews that because they are so concentrated in the Law, in what they do and don’t have to do, they forget about God, the emotions and feelings of being part of that especial relationship. They are so strict and rigid that they just cannot give space to anything more than the law itself.

But at the same time there are also Jews that they forget the rules and they think that feelings and emotions are almost the only important: Having a beautiful Shabbat experience with music and spirituality is much more important for them than keeping kosher and Shabbat. And I think

this is also not good because that is similar to liking the wedding celebration but not the daily commitments! The goal is to maintain the relationship forever and in order to achieve that we have to commit also to the “not-so-funny” part: Going to work every day to maintain the family, taking the kids every day to school, etc, etc.

We have a very important lesson from this week’s Parsha: Let’s enjoy from being Jews, let’s celebrate our relationship with God through our feelings and meaningful experiences, but let’s also remember that Judaism tries not to stay only in the emotions, and that it is essential to translate emotions and romanticism for the daily life.

Let’s not be “ritualistic Jews” who are slaves to the law and can’t feel at all, but let’s also commit with passion to Jews practice: To kashrut, to Jewish prayer, to Shabbat, to a life of mitzvot.

Shabbat Shalom!