



TEMPLE
ISRAEL
CENTER

Shabbat Schmooze at the Nursery School



MISHPATIM: KIDS AND COMPASION, ELLEN AND PETER ALLAR

MISHPATIM, EXODUS 21:1–24:18

Questions and Ideas for Parents:

1. What are some of the things you and your family can do in your community to show compassion towards others?
2. What are some of the ways your children can practice being compassionate at home?
3. Do you think that laws help people act in a moral and just manner? Why or why not?

You shall not wrong a stranger or oppress him, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. -Exodus 22:20
You shall not oppress a stranger, for you know the feelings of the stranger, having yourselves been strangers in the land of Egypt. -Exodus 23:9

Mishpatim, which can be defined as laws or rules, constitute a healthy part of this *parashah*. Included are laws about the acquisition of Hebrew slaves, laws about fatally striking a man and laws about insulting one's father or mother, to name just a few. While the laws included in this *parashah* might seem simple and straightforward at first, taken together they can be read as sophisticated instructions for creating a just and fair society.

At a recent synagogue worship service celebrating the life of Martin Luther King, Jr., we were fortunate to hear a Baptist reverend give a sermon. The main thrust of the reverend's sermon was the importance of sharing with our children the difficulties we have encountered in our own lives. He believes that, in order for future generations to truly appreciate the strides that have been made in moving towards a just and fair society, they must know the difficulties endured by those who came before.

While the laws of our land don't state that we must teach this to our children, this reverend's teaching elegantly speaks to what may result when we follow the command of the two passages quoted above, similar but for a slight change in wording. Both are found, each within close proximity of the other, in this *parashah*. This incredibly important concept is an integral and constant part of the story of our people, woven into our liturgy and our rituals. By remembering, we can transform the memory of our enslavement into a force for positive change.

This imperative, to remember that we were once slaves in the land of Egypt, has the potential to serve as a constant springboard for action, a reminder to do everything in our power to help those who are less fortunate than we are. By focusing on others, by shifting our gaze from our own problems to helping others, we develop compassion.

We were once invited to teach a music session for a class of special needs preschoolers. At the conclusion of the session, while gathering our coats and saying goodbye, we watched the teacher, clearly very skilled in working with these youngsters, handle a potential conflict. One of the young boys was behaving inappropriately. The teacher gently but firmly spoke to the child, in earshot of his classmates, and asked him to make better choices. She also asked several of the other children to ask this young boy to make better choices, which they did, gently but firmly.

We spoke to the teacher later that day and asked about that particular interaction. We wanted to know what her strategy was and how often she had to employ it. She told us about a method she learned from Becky Bailey, a well-known professional in the field of Early Childhood Education. Bailey's program is called Conscious Discipline, and it consists of strategies for responding to—rather than reacting to—life events. Through responding, Bailey says that moments of conflict can be transformed into cooperative learning opportunities. She does this not only to turn conflict from negative to positive, but also to promote a classroom that lives and breathes compassion. The teacher we were observing told us how this method had transformed her classroom into a much gentler and more compassionate environment than she had ever experienced in her many years of teaching young children.

The young boy who was asked to make better choices could have been harshly reprimanded. Instead, the teacher took this opportunity to remind him and the other students of the expectations of the classroom community. She asked that all of her students guide one another in making better choices for their selves and their group. As a team, they worked together, compassionately, to help maintain a calm and compassionate environment in the classroom.

One of the messages in the commandment to remember that we were once slaves in the land of Egypt is that we have a moral imperative to act upon this memory, that each of us must perform good and kind acts, deeds that continue to help others. We must each make compassion the force that fuels and nurtures our relationships with each other. As you can see, it is never too early to start.