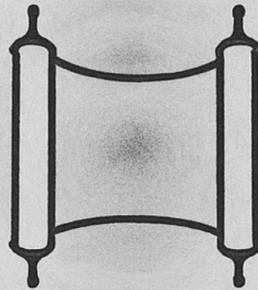


בס"ד

**Rabbi Menachem Mendel
of Horodak
Parshas Mishpatim**



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Menachem Mendel of Horodak

Pri Ha'Eretz

Parshas Mishpatim

Introduction

Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Horodok (circa 1730–1788), one of the foremost disciples of the Maggid of Mezritch and a central transmitter of early Chassidic thought, was renowned for articulating how the most abstract divine principles descend into concrete halachic reality. In this maamar, beginning from the discussion of judgments and civil law, he unfolds a sweeping vision in which Torah law, divine kindness, limitation, and human justice are revealed as the very mechanism through which God’s presence becomes manifest and the world itself is sustained.

The questioner asked three matters. Moses was perplexed about them until the Holy One, blessed be He, showed him. And they are the menorah, the new moon, and the shekel, which is from the matter of the portion of Shekalim.

שאל השואל שלשה דברים. נתקשה משה עד שהראה לו הקדוש ברוך הוא. והן מגורה החדש שקל, שהיא מעגן פרשת שקלים.

The Rav opened: “And these are the judgments,” explanation: “And these” adds to the earlier ones. Just as those are from Sinai, so these are from Sinai.

פתח הרב: ואלה המשפטים. פרוש: ואלה מוסיף על הראשונים. מה הם מסיני, אף אלו מסיני.

And “before them” and not before the courts of gentiles, which are called idolatrous, as it is said: “For our Rock is not like their rock, and our enemies are judges” (Deuteronomy 32:31).

ואחר כך לפניהם ולא לפני ערפאות של גוים שמקרא שם איליים, שנאמר: פי לא כצורנו צורם (Deuteronomy 32:31) ואיבינו פלילים.

The matter is that one should not materialize the commandments of judgments, which are, seemingly, material and composite.

הענין הוא שלא לגשם מצות דינים שהם לכאורה גשמים מורכבים.

For you acquire a slave, and the commandments of the four guardians, money or vessels to guard, or his deposit, as the question of the questioner.

כי תקנה עבד ומצות ארבעה שומרים, כסף או כלים לשמור או פקדונות, כשאלת השואל.

For behold, seemingly, the wisdom of astronomy, philosophy, that their wisdom and understanding are in the eyes of the nations, and it speaks of materialities more simple than the commandments of laws and judgments.

שהרי לכאורה חכמת תכונה פילוסופיה, שחקמתם ובינתם לעיני העמים, והיא מדברת בגשמים יתר פשוטים ממצות דינים ומשפטים.

If indeed, nevertheless, they are vanity, deeds of delusion. “What has straw to do with grain?” And wisdom, what have they that is measured by the intellect of the material human that perishes and is lost.

אם אמנם בלא הכי הבל המה מעשי תעותועים. מה לתבן את הבר. וחכמת מה להם המשער בשכל האדם הגשמי הפלה ונפקד.

But not so our Torah in holiness, through which He looked and created the world, which is the secret of His Godliness, may He

משאין פן תורתנו בקדושה שנסתפל בה וברא את העולם, שהיא סוד אלהותו ותברך, וכמה פנים כפטיש ופלץ סלע.

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be blessed, and it has many faces like a hammer that shatters a rock.

And it preceded the world, and was concealed from the eyes of all living, and every letter and word, matter and commandment, everything is the secret of His Godliness.

וקדמה לעולם, ונעלמה מעיני כל חי, וכל אות ותיבה
ענינו ומצוה, הכל סוד אלהותו.

And the secret of the creation of the worlds and their existence, how the matter is necessary and it is impossible in another manner, since it is drawn down from a lofty place.

וסוד בריאת העולמות וקיומם, איך הדבר מקרה ואי
אפשר בענינו אחר, להיותו משתלשל ממקום גבוה.

And for every commandment in the Torah there is a root above, in particular, but in order to understand the matter in a general way we will say to return to the first principles.

ולכל מצוה שבתורה שרש למעלה בפריטיות, אבל
בכדי להבין הענינו דרוך קלל נאמר לחזור אל
הראשונות.

For the Infinite, blessed be He, is sufficient in His Godliness and has no need for any created being, for behold everything is from Him.

כי אין-סוף ברוך הוא דיו באלהותו ואינו צריך
לשום נברא, שהרי הכל מאותו.

And He did not desire the creation of the world except from the greatness of His kindness and His nature to bestow, as the statement: "The world is built with kindness."

ולא רצה בבריאת העולם כי אם מגדל חסדו וטבעו
להיטיב, כמאמר: עולם חסד יבנה.

In order that there be one to whom to bestow, and that the kindness flowing from the Infinite, blessed be He, also be infinite to the wicked and to the good alike.

בכדי שיהיה למי להיטיב, ולהיות החסד הנשפע
מאין-סוף ברוך הוא גם כן אין-סוף לרשעים
ולטובים.

And it would not be recognizable, the noble before the poor, since it is without limit, and a thing that is unlimited is not recognizable.

ולא נפר שנה לפני דל, שהוא בלי גבול, ודבר שהוא
בלתי מגבל אינו נפר.

And the world would return to its first simplicity in its being within the Infinite, therefore there was a need for limitation of the Torah: "Thus far shall you come."

ויחזור העולם לפשטותו הראשון בהיותו באין-סוף,
לכן הצריך להיות הגבלת התורה: עד פה תבוא.

Which is the matter of contraction, and wisdom preceded in each and every thing to reveal His Godliness, which is the existence of the world and its creation.

שהוא ענינו הצמצום, והחכמה הקדימה בכל דבר
ודבר להתגלות אלהותו, שהוא קיום העולם
ובריאתו.

From the beginning through a fixed statute, weighed on the scale of the balances of justice of the Torah and the commandment.

מתחלה על-ידי חק קצוב ושקול בפלס מאזני משפט
התורה והמצוה.

As the statement: "You shall not favor the poor," not to show mercy in judgment, "For you shall acquire a slave, six years he shall serve,"

כמאמר: ודל לא תהדר, שלא לרחם בדין. כי תקנה
עבד, שש שנים יעבד.

For they limit the kindnesses so that they not spread beyond what is proper, and so are all the matters of laws and judgments.

שמגבילים החסדים שלא יתפשטו יתר על הראוי,
וכן כל עניני הדינים והמשפטים.

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<p>In the matters of guardians, deposits, and loans, to limit and to separate, to each one, that which reaches him.</p>	<p>בְּעִנְיֵי הַשּׁוֹמְרִים וּפְקֻדוֹת וְהַלְוֹאוֹת, לְהַגְבִּיל וּלְהַפְרִישׁ לְכָל אֶחָד מִמַּגִּיעַ אֵצֶל.</p>
<p>And because of the boundary that He set, every single thing is recognizable and limited according to its kind, and one does not encroach upon that which is prepared for his fellow.</p>	<p>וּמִחֻמַּת הַגְּבוּל אֲשֶׁר שָׂם, נִכָּר וּמִגְבִּיל כָּל דָּבָר וְדָבָר לְמִינֵהוּ, וְאִין אֶחָד נֹגֵעַ בְּמוֹכֵן לְחֶבְרוֹ.</p>
<p>And behold, the boundary and the discernment are the revelation of His Godliness, may He be blessed, and the existence of the world.</p>	<p>וְהִנֵּה הַגְּבוּל וְהַחֲפָרָה הוּא הַתְּגִלוֹת אֱלֹהוּתוֹ יִתְבָּרַךְ וְקִיּוּם הָעוֹלָם.</p>
<p>In contrast, the multitude of kindnesses and expansion without boundary are not recognizable and revealed, but rather equalize and make equal small and great alike.</p>	<p>מִשְׂאִין כֵּן רַבּוּי הַחֲסָדִים וְהַתְּפִשּׁוּת בְּלִי גְבוּל אִינוֹ נִכָּר וּמִתְגַּלֶּה, כִּי אִם שְׁוֵה וּמְשֻׁנֶּה קָטָן וְגָדוֹל.</p>
<p>There it is that it is a flood of waters and the return of the world to chaos and void.</p>	<p>שָׂם הוּא שֶׁהוּא מִבּוּל מִיָּם וְחֲזָרַת הָעוֹלָם לְתוֹהוּ וְבוֹהוּ.</p>
<p>And behold, the matter of the judges of Israel is that they need to be cleaving to the Lord, the living God.</p>	<p>וְהִנֵּה עִנְיַן דִּינֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל הַצָּרִיכִים לִהְיוֹת דְּבָקִים בֵּה' אֱלֹהִים חַיִּים.</p>
<p>And in their cleaving to Him, may He be blessed, they would be fit to bestow much kindness, which is the beginning and the end of the cleaving of the caused beings to the Cause of causes.</p>	<p>וּבְהַתְּדַבְּקָם אֵלָיו יִתְבָּרַךְ, וְהָיוּ רְאוּיִים לְהַתְּחַסֵּד הַרְבֵּה, שֶׁהוּא הַרְאֵשִׁית וְהַתְּכֵלִית הַדְּבָקוֹת שֶׁל הָעוֹלָמִים בְּעֵלֵת הָעֲלוֹת.</p>
<p>Which is the expansion in the world, “the world is built with kindness,” in order to bestow good upon His creatures.</p>	<p>שֶׁהוּא הַהַתְּפִשּׁוּת בְּעוֹלָם, עוֹלָם חֲסֵד יְבֻנָּה, בְּכַדֵּי לְהִיטִיב לְבְרוּאָיו.</p>
<p>And behold, that cleaving is without boundary to His mercies, abundant like the greatness of the kindnesses of the Name, which have no end.</p>	<p>וְהִנֵּה אוֹתָהּ הַדְּבָקוֹת הִיא בְּלִי גְבוּל לְרַחֲמָיו, מְרַבִּים כַּגִּדְל חֲסָדֵי הַשֵּׁם שֶׁאִין לָהֶם סוּף.</p>
<p>But the Torah commanded the boundary of the kindnesses, not to show mercy in judgment.</p>	<p>אָבָל הַתּוֹרָה צִוְתָהּ בְּגְבוּל הַחֲסָדִים, שֶׁלֹּא לְרַחֵם בַּדִּין.</p>
<p>And behold, it is a command and one performs it, to return from the kindnesses to judgment.</p>	<p>וְהִנֵּה הוּא מִצְוָה וְעוֹשָׂה לְחַזֹּר מִן הַחֲסָדִים עַד לַדִּין.</p>
<p>Thus, in this judgment, he connects and associates the attribute of mercy with the attribute of judgment.</p>	<p>הָרִי שֶׁבְּמִשְׁפָּט זֶה הוּא מְחַבֵּר וּמְשַׁתֵּף מֵדַת הַרַחֲמִים לְמֵדַת הַדִּין.</p>
<p>Which is the line of judgment, the middle line, that unifies and connects kindnesses and severities together.</p>	<p>שֶׁהוּא קוֹ הַמִּשְׁפָּט, הַקּוֹ הָאֲמֻצָּעִי, הַמְּיַחֵד וּמְחַבֵּר חֲסָדִים וּגְבוּרוֹת יַחַד.</p>
<p>Which is the beginning of the creation of the world in this manner, and it is the existence of the world.</p>	<p>שֶׁהוּא תְּחִלַּת בְּרִיאַת הָעוֹלָם עַל דְּרָף זֶה, וְהוּא קִיּוּם הָעוֹלָם.</p>
<p>And this is what our Rabbis of blessed memory said: “One who wishes to be a pious person should fulfill the matters of damages.”</p>	<p>וְהוּא אָמְרוּ רַבּוֹתֵינוּ זְכוֹרָנֶם לְבִרְכָה: מֵאֵן דְּבַעֵי לְמַהְרֵי חֲסִידָא, יְקַנְיִים מִלֵּי דְנַזְיָקִין.</p>

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Which, seemingly, is far from kindnesses, but it is very deep indeed.

אָפֿער, לְכַאוֹרָה רַחוּק הוּא מִחֶסֶדִים, וְעִמוּק עִמוּק הוּא

For the pious are to bestow kindness with their Creator alone, without any interruption of materiality.

כִּי הַחֲסִידִים לְהִתְחַסֵּד עִם קוֹנָם לְבַד, בְּלִי שׁוּם הַפְּסֵק גְּשָׁמִיּוֹת.

And all the matters of damages are only materialities.

וְכָל עֲנָנוּ מִיְלֵי דְנִזְיוֹקִין הֵם רַק גְּשָׁמִים

Therefore, in the courts of gentiles, even if the judgment is equal, it is nevertheless not a commandment, which is an expression of cleaving, but rather it is measured according to human comprehension, body and shell, which is the destruction of the world.

לְכוּן בְּעֵרְפָאוֹת שֶׁל גּוֹיִים, אֲפֵלוּ אִם הֵדִין שְׁוָה, הָרִי אֵינּוּ מִצְוָה שֶׁהוּא לְשׁוֹן דְּבִקּוּת, אֲלֵא הוּא מְשַׁעַר עַל־פִּי הַשְּׂגָה אָנוּשִׁית, גּוּף וּקְלָפָה, שֶׁהוּא חֲרָבֹן הָעוֹלָם.

And this is what our Rabbis of blessed memory said: “What is mine is mine, and what is yours is yours,” this is a middling trait.

וְזֶהוּ אָמְרוּ רַבּוֹתֵינוּ זְכוֹרֵנָם לְבִרְכָה: שְׁלִי שְׁלִי וְשְׁלֵךְ שְׁלֵךְ, זֶה מְדָה בֵּינוֹנִית

For the boundary between what is his and what is his fellow’s is judgment, the middle line that connects kindness and severity, which is a middling trait.

שְׁהָרִי הַגְּבוּל בֵּין שְׁלוֹ לְשֶׁל חֲבֵרוֹ הוּא הַמְשָׁפֵט, קוֹ הָאֲמָצְעִי הַמְחַבֵּר חֶסֶד וּגְבוּרָה, שֶׁהוּא מְדָה בֵּינוֹנִית

And there are those who say: this is the trait of Sodom, if the judgment and the boundary are not according to the Torah and the commandments of Him, may He be blessed.

וַיֵּשׂ אֲוִמְרִים: זֶה מְדַת סְדוֹם, אִם הַמְשָׁפֵט וְהַגְּבוּל אֵינּוּ עַל־פִּי הַתּוֹרָה וְהַדְּבָרוֹת בּוֹ יִתְבָּרַךְ

But rather according to human intellect, behold this is the trait of Sodom, which is the destruction of the world.

כִּי אִם עַל־פִּי שֶׁכָּל אָנוּשִׁי, הָרִי זֶה מְדַת סְדוֹם שֶׁהוּא חֲרָבֹן הָעוֹלָם

For every boundary is severity and shell, and this is the matter of the half-shekel, about which Moses was perplexed, which is knowledge.

שֶׁכָּל גְּבוּל הוּא גְבוּרָה וּקְלָפָה, וְזֶהוּ עֲנָנוּ מִחֲצִית הַשֶּׁקֶל שֶׁנִּתְקַשְׁשָׁה מְשָׁה, שֶׁהוּא הַדַּעַת

For this matter does not seem to belong to and be attributed to knowledge, since the shekel, the act of giving, is bestowal and expansion, and within it is a half, which is limitation.

כִּי אֵינוּ הַדְּבָר זֶה שֶׁיֵּד וּמִיחֶסֶס אֵל הַדַּעַת, שֶׁהָרִי הַשֶּׁקֶל הַנְּתִינָה הוּא הַשְּׁפָעָה וְהַתְּפִשְׁטוּת, וּבִתּוֹכוֹ מִחֲצִית שֶׁהוּא גְבוּל

Until He showed him that it is the contemplation that makes vessels and limitation.

עַד שֶׁהִרְאָה לוֹ שֶׁהוּא הַהֶסְתַּכְּלוּת שֶׁעוֹשָׂה כְּלִים וּגְבוּל

Just as the Holy One, blessed be He, contemplated the Torah and created the world through the boundaries of the Torah.

כְּמוֹ שֶׁהִסְתַּכֵּל הַקְּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא בַּתּוֹרָה וּבְרָא אֶת הָעוֹלָם עַל־יְדֵי גְבוּלֵי הַתּוֹרָה

Which is a vessel that holds blessing and bestowal, which is unification and connection of both, which is knowledge that receives after contemplation.

שֶׁהוּא כְּלִי מִחֲזִיק בְּרִכָּה וְהַשְּׁפָעָה, שֶׁהוּא יְחוּד וְחִבּוּר שֶׁנִּיחָם, שֶׁהוּא הַדַּעַת שֶׁמְקַבֵּל אַחַר הַהֶסְתַּכְּלוּת

And this is the matter of what our Rabbis of blessed memory said: “A sela for charity so that my son may live,” behold this one is righteous.

וְהוּא עֲנָנוּ אָמְרוּ רַבּוֹתֵינוּ זְכוֹרֵנָם לְבִרְכָה: סֵלַע זֶה לְצַדִּיקָה בְּשִׁבִיל שִׂיחָהּ בְּנִי, הָרִי זֶה צַדִּיק

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Because his giving is due to his faith in the Torah, “you shall surely give,” which is the boundary, and thus it holds blessing.

להיות נתינתו מקמת אמונתו בתורה, נתון תמו, שהוא הגבול, והכי מחזיק בקרבה.

And the revelation of the kindnesses in the world, for if there is no boundary there is no world.

והתגלות החסדים בעולם, שאם אין גבול אין עולם.

And therefore, through the boundary, it is the pathway to the expansion of vitality.

ולכן על-ידי הגבול הוא השביל להתפשטות החיות.

And this is “so that my son may live,” therefore behold this one is righteous, for he is the connector.

וזהו בשביל שישקיה בני, לכן הרי זה צדיק שהוא המקשר.

[NOTE Summary:

The maamar opens with the distinction between Torah law and human legal systems. Even when the rulings of non-Jewish courts appear fair and equitable, they remain rooted in human intellect, bodily perception, and the external husk of reality. Such law lacks the quality of mitzvah, which is essentially an act of deveikut, cleaving to God. Law grounded only in human reason is therefore not constructive but ultimately destructive, for it severs justice from its divine source and turns limitation into mere severity and concealment.

This idea is illuminated through the teaching of the Sages: “What is mine is mine and what is yours is yours” can be either a neutral, intermediate trait or the trait of Sodom. The difference depends on the source of the boundary. When boundaries between people are established through Torah, they form the middle line that unites kindness and restraint, chesed and gevurah. When those same boundaries arise solely from human logic, they become the trait of Sodom, a rigid self-protection that destroys society and the world itself. Every boundary contains gevurah and concealment; only when that boundary is rooted in Torah does it serve revelation rather than ruin.

From here the maamar turns to the mystery of the half-shekel, about which Moses was perplexed. Giving is, by nature, an act of expansion and flow. How, then, can giving contain a half, a boundary? This paradox touches the essence of daat. Moses was shown that it is precisely contemplation, histaklut, that creates vessels and limits. Just as God looked into the Torah and created the world through the measured boundaries of Torah, so too human giving must be shaped by divine limits in order to become a vessel that holds blessing.

The half-shekel thus embodies the unity of opposites: expansion and restriction, kindness and boundary. It is through this balance that blessing can endure. Unbounded kindness dissolves the world back into chaos, while measured kindness, guided by Torah, allows life-force to spread in a sustainable way. This is why the Torah insists on limits within acts of giving and judgment alike.

The maamar concludes by reinterpreting the teaching that one who gives charity “so that my son may live” is called righteous. Such giving is not transactional but rooted in faith in the Torah’s structure of reality. “You shall surely give” implies measured giving, bounded giving, which becomes a vessel for blessing. Through

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boundary, life expands; through limitation, vitality flows. The truly righteous person is one who unites these forces, serving as the connector between divine kindness and the structured world that can receive it.

Practical Takeaway:

Justice, generosity, and kindness must always be guided by Torah boundaries. Acting fairly is not enough if fairness is detached from divine will. True righteousness lies in learning when to give, when to restrain, and how to let Torah shape both, so that kindness builds the world rather than dissolving it.

Chassidic Story:

It was said of Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Horodok that once, when a poor man approached him for assistance, the Rebbe did not immediately give him money. Instead, he questioned him gently about his needs, his family, and his circumstances. Only afterward did he give him a precise amount, neither more nor less.

A student, puzzled, asked why the Rebbe did not simply give generously without calculation. Rabbi Menachem Mendel replied that unmeasured giving can embarrass the recipient or weaken his own sense of responsibility. "The Torah," he explained, "does not want kindness that floods and erases. It wants kindness that builds. When giving is measured according to Torah, it becomes a vessel that holds blessing, both for the giver and for the one who receives."

In this way, he taught his students that holiness is not found in excess alone, but in the harmony between expansion and limit, the very harmony through which God sustains the world.

END NOTE]