

The rollercoaster we live in rushes forward every week, challenging the ever-beating hope for the release of hostages held captive by Hamas in Gaza. Our eyes well up again and again, whether from the excitement of a family reunion, good news, or terrible reports awaiting those who have been freed. We all live with unbearable tension and uncertainty—will the Israeli government continue the deal, or will Hamas deviate from the understanding?

We, the residents of the north, have already spent more than 500 days experiencing uncertainty about the fate of our devastated and abandoned communities, wondering when and how we will return to our homes. During these days, when we are all preoccupied with the fate of each hostage, we come to read Parashat Mishpatim, which contains many commandments that directly relate to our present reality.

Parashat Mishpatim begins with the commandment to free a Hebrew slave: "When you acquire a Hebrew slave, he shall serve six years, and in the seventh, he shall go free, without payment." (Exodus 21:2) The law is simple: A Hebrew slave is not destined to remain enslaved forever. A Hebrew master must allow his servant to leave servitude and become free. Many commentators have wondered why Parashat Mishpatim, which expands upon the commandments given at Mount Sinai, begins with the law of the Hebrew slave.

According to the Midrash: "It begins with the law of the Hebrew slave because they were slaves in Egypt, and the Holy One, blessed be He, redeemed them and granted them freedom. Therefore, He commanded Israel first and foremost not to enslave their fellow Israelites harshly or permanently, only until the seventh year, as it is written: 'For they are My servants, whom I freed from the land of Egypt' (Leviticus 25:42). Therefore, the section begins with the Hebrew slave." (Midrash Aggadah, Exodus 21:2)

Not only must the slave be freed after seven years, but he must be acquired in the first place—meaning that a master cannot simply find a person and enslave them.

The acquisition process regulates slavery and simultaneously turns the master into a sort of God-like figure, acquiring heaven and earth. The Torah limits the arbitrary power of slave owners. But more than that, the law of the Hebrew slave expresses the Torah's principle that every person has the right to break free from the cycle of poverty and enslavement.

Another commandment states: "You shall not wrong or oppress a stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt" (Exodus 22:20). This verse explains why we must avoid deceiving or pressuring the stranger: as a remembrance of our own experience as slaves in Egypt. A free person must remember their past enslavement and identify with the stranger's sense of alienation.

The Midrash expands on this commandment: "You shall not wrong a stranger. There are two types of wrongdoing: one involving money and one involving words. And you shall not oppress him—there are two types of oppression: one involving money and one involving words." (Mekhilta of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, Exodus 22:20)

The Torah calls on us to see the stranger as someone deserving of compassion, and more than that, to see ourselves in the stranger. Because I was a slave in Egypt, I must avoid deceiving or oppressing the stranger. Like the slave, the stranger deserves to be free.

Another group of commandments warns against blindly following rumors and societal norms: "You shall not carry false rumors; do not join hands with the wicked to be a malicious witness. Do not follow the majority to do evil, nor shall you pervert a case to go along with the majority. Nor shall you show deference to a poor man in his dispute." (Exodus 23:1–3)

The Torah warns against being swept away by false reports and harmful speech. It cautions against the tendency to follow the majority and the mainstream, as well as against the inclination to favor someone based on their social or economic status.

The importance of this commandment cannot be overstated in a time when we are exposed daily to false rumors deliberately spread. Furthermore, the Torah warns against going with the flow, which often comes at the expense of others: "You shall not follow the majority to do evil" (Exodus 23:2). The majority sways judgment, but as free individuals, we must refrain from harming others just to align with the prevailing opinion.

A central principle connects all these commandments: the sanctity of human life— not just the lives of Israelites, but all human beings. Even in the Torah's earliest legal code, we see how the principle of freeing slaves expands into a broader principle of valuing human life and ensuring every person's right to live with dignity, whether they are slaves or strangers.

The Torah encourages us to see every hostage as a human being whose life is precious and sacred. It establishes the foundation for the importance of redeeming captives. But even more than that, the Torah calls on us to see strangers as people like ourselves—a more challenging commandment. It urges us to recognize the suffering of those who live alongside us, even if they are our bitterest enemies.

Amid our discourse about love for the hostages, support for their families, and the urgent call for their release, we must remember: "For you were strangers in the land of Egypt" (Deuteronomy 10:19). We must acknowledge even the suffering of our enemies and strive to understand them—because only through this can we all emerge from the constraints of this bitter conflict. What is true in personal relationships is even more critical in relationships between groups and nations.

Shabbat Shalom!

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Rabbi Orit Rosenblit was born in 1960, and grew up in Kibbutz Dvir as the fourth daughter of its founding members. She was educated in the kibbutz education system. She later earned her teaching certification in Jewish Thought and Literature at Oranim, as well as a master's degree in Oral Torah from the University of Haifa.

In 2000, she moved with her family to Metula, where she has since worked to promote Jewish renewal in the Galilee Panhandle. For over a decade, she played a key role in realizing the vision of a coeducational yeshiva as a means of deepening Jewish renewal. This vision, which seeks to cultivate Torah scholars from all segments of society, led her to pursue rabbinical studies at Hebrew Union College.

She is the founding rabbi of an egalitarian Masorti (Conservative) community in Kiryat Shmona. Rabbi Rosenblit is married to Nitzan, a mother of a daughter and three grown sons, and a grandmother to six granddaughters. She has been a resident of Metula but has been displaced from her home for a year and a half, along with most of her community members.