



# DVAR TZEDEK TEXT STUDY

## Parshat Mishpatim 5772

February 18, 2012

**Something's different!** This week marks the third installment of a new, experimental initiative: the Dvar Tzedek Text Study. Periodically over the next several months, our weekly Torah commentary will take this interactive format. We hope that you'll use our text studies to actively engage with the *parshah* and contemporary global justice issues.

Consider using this text study in any of the following ways:

- **Learn collectively.** Discuss it with friends, family or colleagues. Try using it as a conversation-starter at your Shabbat table.
- **Enrich your own learning.** Read it as you would a regular Dvar Tzedek and reflect on the questions it raises.
- **Teach.** Use the ideas and reactions it sparks in you as the basis for your own *dvar Torah*.

Please take a minute to [tell us what you think](#) of this experimental format.

### Introduction

*Parshat Mishpatim* includes the first two appearances of the commandment not to oppress the stranger, an injunction that occurs 36 times in the Torah.<sup>1</sup>

#### Exodus 22:20 and 23:9

(20) You shall not wrong or oppress a stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.

(9) You shall not oppress a stranger, for you know the soul of the stranger, having yourselves been strangers in the land of Egypt.

#### שמות כב:כ, כג:ט

(כ) וְגֵר לֹא תוֹנֶה וְלֹא תִלְחָצֶנּוּ כִּי גֵרִים

הָיִיתֶם בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם :

(ט) וְגֵר לֹא תִלְחָץ וְאַתֶּם יָדַעְתֶּם אֶת נַפְשׁ

הַגֵּר כִּי גֵרִים הָיִיתֶם בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם :

- What are the differences between the two formulations of this commandment?
- What do these verses identify as the motivation for protecting the stranger? What do you think it means to “know the soul of the stranger”?
- How does this text resonate with you?

The verses above are often used to support Jewish involvement in efforts to support and protect the most vulnerable and marginalized members of society and the world. One such example is as follows:

#### Rabbi Joachim Prinz, Speech at the 1963 March on Washington for civil rights<sup>2</sup>

... From our Jewish historic experience of three and a half thousand years we say: Our ancient history began with slavery and the yearning for freedom. During the Middle Ages my people lived for a thousand

<sup>1</sup> Bava Metzia 59b.

<sup>2</sup> Prinz, Rabbi Joachim. Speech at the 1963 March on Washington. The full transcript of this speech is archived by the Jewish Women's Archive *Living the Legacy* project. It can be found at <http://jwa.org/node/11438>.

years in the ghettos of Europe. Our modern history begins with a proclamation of emancipation. It is for these reasons that it is not merely sympathy and compassion for the black people of America that motivates us. It is, above all and beyond all such sympathies and emotions, a sense of complete identification and solidarity born of our own painful historic experience.

- How does Prinz characterize the Jewish historic experience?
- How does his application of Exodus 22:20 and 23:9 speak to you today?

### Steven Bayme, "American Jewry Confronts the Twenty-First Century"<sup>3</sup>

The Jewish story in America has been an unprecedented success story. The outer lives of Jews as Americans elicit the envy of virtually every other ethnic and religious grouping. Jewish security rests on firm bases, and Jewish social and economic upward mobility remain high. By the criteria of educational and income achievements, Jews have done extremely well.

- 47 years after Prinz, how does Bayme characterize the Jewish experience in America? Which of these texts resonates more with your experience of being Jewish?
- To what extent do you think it is possible to "know the soul" of people who are oppressed if your experience is grounded in privilege?
- Is empathy or a personal experience of oppression a necessary component of social justice activism? How might the experience of success affect Jews' motivation to "not oppress the stranger" today?

### Conclusion

For many Jews, "we were strangers in Egypt" is the rallying cry that motivates the sense of responsibility to stand in solidarity with those in America and around the world who continue to experience oppression today. But many in the American Jewish community have attained great power and privilege, taking us further from knowing the heart of the stranger than we were half a century ago.

- Given this shift, what aspect of your Jewish identity motivates your commitment to pursue justice for those who are vulnerable and marginalized today?

May we draw on both the opportunities that have come with prosperity and the lessons of our history to motivate and inspire us to engage in the pursuit of justice for all.

Please take a minute to [tell us what you think](#) of this experimental format.

---

<sup>3</sup> Steven Bayme, "American Jewry Confronts the Twenty-First Century," *American Jewry's Comfort Level: Present and Future*, eds. Manfred Gerstenfeld and Steven Bayme (Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, 2010) 47. <http://www.jcpa.org/text/americanjewry.pdf>

©2012 American Jewish World Service

To subscribe to this publication, please visit [www.ajws.org/dvartzedek](http://www.ajws.org/dvartzedek).

Inspired by Judaism's commitment to justice, **American Jewish World Service** works to realize human rights and end poverty in the developing world.