

## Parashat Mishpatim sermon February 2017

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President Porfirio Díaz once quipped “*Pobre México: tan lejos de Dios, y tan cerca de los Estados Unidos*: Poor Mexico—so far from G-d, and so close to the United States. “ This *bon mot* has been part of Mexicans’ ironic self-description for more than a hundred years. But it’s easy to put too much emphasis on the punch line: when he said *tan lejos de Dios*, the seminarian-turned-strong-man was actually making an analogy between Mexico and Israel, in which the Mexicans take the part of G-d’s erring, chosen people, distanced from G-d by their own sins, and as a consequence buffeted by powerful and hostile secular forces. Whenever Israel strays from G-d, or G-d withdraws His Presence, Israel finds itself at the mercy of Egypt or Mesopotamia, the superpowers of their time. But Díaz holds out the hope that by drawing closer to G-d, G-d’s people may have less to fear from the godless. This is one theme raised by this week’s Torah portion, Parashat Mishpatim—what it means for G-d’s presence to be partially withdrawn.

On page 474 in the Etz Hayim (Exod 23:20), Hashem says “*Hinei anochi sholeach mal’ach l’faneycha*” – “I am sending an angel before you” into the Promised Land. That is, according to the commentary below the line page 474, a positive reminder that the journey into Canaan is divinely guided. Now those words “divinely guided” are a bit of verbal legerdemain on the part of the Conservative Movement’s Drash Editor, Harold Kushner. If you believe an angel is a perfect manifestation of G-d’s will, then there is no problem here. With an angel, a ‘divine guide,’ going before us into the Promised Land, it was no different from being guided by Hashem Himself, namely being “Divinely guided. “

But what an immense difference in connotation. To illustrate with a counterexample: You have all recited the midrash to Deuteronomy, in the Passover Haggadah: “And the Lord brought us out of Mitzrayim—not by an angel, and not by a seraph, and not by a messenger, but the Holy One, blessed is He, *bichvodo v’atzmo*” – *in his glory, and He Himself*. The G-d who takes personal charge of His people is not one to delegate away such a critical task as bringing us out of Egypt, is he? And while delegation may be efficient, it also adds distance to the relationship, and when things have been done in person in the past, it can be a clear social slight. Just think of the reaction when President Obama delegated a low-level representative to attend Margaret Thatcher’s funeral, rather than going himself. Or, to venture briefly into pop culture, think of the implications when Daddy Morbucks delegates his chauffeur to drive his daughter Princess to Pokey Oaks School. It says some things about that parent and that child, doesn’t it?

So, with due respect to Rabbi Kushner, traditional rabbis are livid about that angel. “Divinely guided,” indeed. What could Hashem be thinking, sending an angel to guide His people? Could it really be that Hashem—*He Himself, in His glory*--would *not* be with us as we enter the Promised Land—the land of Hashem’s Own promise? Let’s check the text and see: ...well yes, it looks like that’s exactly the case. Hashem specifies that His angel is not about to tolerate bad behavior or show any mercy. Now we are on page 475, verse 21 (Exod 23:21): “Do not defy him for he will not pardon your offense, since *sh’mi b’kirbo*—my name is inside him.” No question now that this is a low-level representative, nothing at all like G-d—more like a golem, an automaton animated by the name of G-d, but conspicuously lacking G-d’s own qualities of mercy and of independent judgment. This passage, by the way, is one that is used to establish the hierarchy of divine qualities, and why the merciful G-d we call ‘Adonai’ sits on a higher throne than when the same G-d is dispensing justice and is called ‘Elohim’: Hashem can designate an angel to do justice, the lower function, but never delegates the higher divine quality of mercy.

We learn some more unflattering characteristics of this angel as we read on: Hashem uses the same words for sending His angel before us as He does for the sending His “terror” and His “plague” before us into the Land of Canaan. That’s page 475 and 476, verses 27- 28 (Exod 23:27-28), just different versions of *anochi sholeach l’faneycha*...and fill in the name of the weapon. That angel is just another howitzer in G-d’s pre-invasion artillery barrage for softening up the Canaanites. A good angel to have on your side, to be sure, and one to stay on the good side of certainly, but nothing like Hashem Himself, in all His glory. So what is going on here? Has Hashem withdrawn the *shchinah*, G-d’s Presence? The rabbis are up in arms. Some explain the withdrawal of the *shchinah* as a response to sin. What sin had the Jewish people, in its infancy as a free nation, committed? Possibly it was punishment in advance for the sin of the Golden Calf, which we’ll hear about 3 weeks from now, in Parashat Ki Tissa. But that sin hadn’t happened yet, at the time of Mishpatim. If Hashem lives outside of time, then maybe from G-d’s standpoint the golden idol had already been cast, and the people had already worshipped it.

The threat of the withdrawal of divine Presence and protection is also a powerful tool for keeping Israel in line: we hear it in the Haftarah for Mishpatim as well. Turn for moment to page 483, where in verse 17 (Jer 34:17) Jeremiah bitterly rebukes the People for withholding *dror*, release or freedom, from their slaves. “I’ll give you *dror*,” Jeremiah quotes Hashem saying, with heavy irony: “*dror el-haCherev, el-haDever, el-haRa’av*...—release to the sword, to pestilence, and to famine.” The only reasonable response to these existential threats is to acknowledge our frailty in the face of more powerful, hostile, secular forces that are right beside us, and to put our trust in, and renew our obedience to, our protecting G-d. That is the implication of Díaz’s message for Mexico: get closer to *Dios*, and maybe He’ll protect us from *los Estados Unidos*.

But back to that angel. Being led by an angel into the Promised Land makes the Chosen People like any other nation. According to Midrash, when Hashem created the 70 nations of the world, He appointed 70 ministering angels as *sarim*—princes—one to manage the affairs of each nation. These angels were essentially the protecting, or tutelary, deities of the nations, though of course they remained only angels of Hashem, not independent gods. And Hashem, the one true G-d, reserved for Himself the role of tutelary deity of Israel. Except, that is, when He became disgusted and appointed an angel for us too, at which point Israel became a nation like any other, led by just another appointed prince. You can imagine Hashem saying, as He does through Amos in Haftarat Kedoshim, which we'll read this May (Amos 9:7), "Are you not like the Ethiopians to me, O Israel? Did I not bring Israel up from Egypt? But also, I brought the Philistines from Caphtor, and the Arameans from Kir." You can hear this as a positive, universalist statement, but you can also hear a serious putdown for the people who think of themselves as G-d's chosen ones. Universalism is always in tension with exceptionalism. Even if it makes us first among equals, there is a profound loss in sharing the G-d of Israel with the Philistines and all those other *goyim*.

Forced to accept Hashem's rebuke and partial withdrawal, the rabbis then work diligently to salvage something—anything—from the angel situation. The angel assigned to Israel must be the Most Important Angel, to be charged with the awesome task of leading The People into The Land. The rabbis of the Midrash identify him as the Archangel Michael, Hashem's sword-arm, arguably the first among the archangels, the one whose name *Mi Cha-el* asks the rhetorical question "who could possibly be like G-d?" Conversely, Talmudic rabbis argue that the angel is *Metatron*, first among angels, whose title is Prince of the World, and whose Hellenistic name Metatron betrays that he is from a different generation of Jewish angelology.

Even the assignment of the most important angel, be it Michael or Metatron, felt terribly wrong to Moses, and there is a wonderful story in the Midrash Rabbah that Moses challenged G-d directly on that subject. "I think," said Moses, "that You Yourself will be back with us before long." No, said Hashem, He would not, and Moses replied, remarkably, "we'll see whose words are true." An astonishing and only semi-canonical bit of chutzpah on the part of Moshe Rabbeinu, but it does ring true: Moses had taken Hashem's measure in face-to-face negotiation, and he had a shrewd idea what text was hidden in G-d's *tefillin shel rosh*: the line "Who is like your people Israel, a unique nation in the land?" With that strong reminder figuratively strapped to G-d's figurative forehead, Moses figured, though G-d may forsake us temporarily, He will always return to us.

Now if being abandoned by G-d is painful and dangerous, it should be stated that living in G-d's protective presence is demanding—and still dangerous. Back in today's Torah portion,

we meet Aaron's sons Nadav and Avihu for the first time. In an episode beginning on page 476 (Exod 24:1-11), Nadav and Avihu go up on the mountain and have lunch in G-d's presence, along with Moses, Aaron, and seventy elders. In what sounds like the first synagogue board meeting, Hashem presides benignly over a planning session attended by a few clergy and all the lay leaders. But clergy, unlike board members, can get fired—literally, in the case of Nadav and Avihu, who as we'll read about in April, will be burned by Hashem, because some kind of *faux pas* in their sacrificial service. It turns out that the *shchinah* is both picky and prickly, and her ways are not easy to understand.

But that's a challenge worth taking up, isn't it? When our Jewish nation was in its infancy, Hashem spoke to us, and to our leaders, directly and constantly. Then like a good parent, *Avinu Malkeinu* began very early on to withdraw His presence gradually in controlled settings, while still maintaining close contact: occasionally, instead of accompanying us everywhere, sometimes He sent an angel. When we were in our adolescence, Hashem kept in contact sporadically, through intermediaries like the prophets. And now that we are an adult nation, we do most of the work of maintaining contact. Not at all forsaken, we are just mostly on our own, and mostly doing OK.

One final analogy, related to my mother's 10<sup>th</sup> *yahrzeit* next week: when I was 17, I went off to college, rough-edged and clueless in many ways, but quite well-prepared by a sheltered and happy childhood for that limited kind of independence. I wanted contact with my parents, but could do OK without it, even though we had practically never been separated for more than a day. I wrote back to my Mom and Dad that it seemed like they had given me a family I could put in my pocket and carry around with me. I don't think I knew consciously at that point that my Dad was dying, but in retrospect it was my first overt realization that there could be life independent of presence: my family was alive within me, even though they were 200 miles away and, in my Dad's case, troubled with cancer. Since then I have learned much more about life independent of presence, even of life independent of the *possibility* of presence--secure in the knowledge that even though both my parents are now very, very far away, they are still potent sources of affection and advice. This is analogous to the position we Jews are in: adult children doing well on our own, still craving and maintaining contact with our distant, loving, living parent. Without that contact, we'd be in a cold, empty, frightening world, buffeted by hostile, secular forces that are right beside us. The way to maintain that contact is to draw closer to G-d, to live in Jewish community in such a way that the loving and demanding *shchinah* will consent, for another generation, to live among us and lead us. That it should not be said of us, *Pobres judíos norteamericanos, tan lejos de Dios....*