

Re'eh 2016

Delivered by Rabbi Aaron Krupnick September 3, 2016

Like most of you, my cell phone has a feature where it guesses the next word it thinks I am about to type. It is a kind of "Auto-Fill." The way that it does this is by recognizing familiar patterns of words - the ones I use and the ones that are commonly used together in English. It usually gives me three choices. Sometimes it gets it right, and sometimes it is comically wrong. But it uses algorithms that know what words usually are used together. In fact, I read recently that psychologists and computer experts are getting together and using this new technology to predict psychosis in people with borderline disorders. They can see, from recording every word a patient says, which words they use more frequently together; certain patterns of words can fairly successfully predict a person's mental stability or lack thereof. In other words, the way certain words are grouped together tells us a lot about an individual and his or her mindset, values and priorities.

Interestingly, the same technology has been employed in analyzing ancient writings, like the literature of ancient Greece. Their written language patterns, their word pairings, offer keen insight into the values and priorities of ancient Greece. I am not sure if the technology has been used in analyzing Torah yet, but I am sure that the patterns found there would also be very insightful. Certain Torah words are frequently used in pairs. One such word pairing, which is referenced in our parsha, is Chesed U'Mishpat. These two words are very often paired, even though they mean two different things. They are usually translated "Righteousness and Justice," but that does not tell the full story.

Both Tzedek and Mishpat are forms of justice. Mishpat, however is the rule of law. The Torah emphasizes Mishpat so that we are bound by "right" and not by "might." The goal is that we create a society where there is one, "justice is blind" system for everyone. The rich are not favored, nor the poor. Mishpat is to be guided by objective truth, by logic, by the "head" and not the "heart." It is no accident that a Gd who is the Gd of us all reveals Himself in Law. Gd has equal regard for all of us.

But Mishpat alone cannot create a truly just society and that's why Mishpat is "Auto-Filled" next to "Tzedek." A just society is not only one in which all people are treated fairly, but also one in which the most vulnerable are protected. The Torah envisions a world in which every individual lives not just with equal law, but equal dignity. Poverty, and xenophobia, and bigotry, were just as big a problem in the ancient world as they are today. "Protect the stranger, the widow, those orphaned by society..." Along with the rule of law the Torah tells us this morning, "If there are needy among you...do not harden your heart, but open your hand." Here the Torah legislates compassion. Head and heart go hand in hand, and that's why Tzedek and Mishpat are such a significant word pair. This word pairing helped to define us as Jews, and in turn influenced the course of all of human history. A truly good and just society was governed by both the rule of law and a sense of compassion for those who do not have access to the basics that allow for human dignity.

You could see how societies throughout the ages could well gravitate toward one pole or the other - but inevitably any society that endured found a balance between the two. It is good for us to remember this- on many levels. As a nation, we are ideally guided by Tzedek U'Mishpat, but

finding the proper balance is tricky. Just look at the immigration debate. It's hard to find the proper balance between law and compassion. It's so much easier to be just pulled to one pole or another - strict adherence to law or boundless compassion. It's the middle ground that is elusive, and yet we know it is where we should, and will, inevitably put our focus.

But Tzedek and Mishpat should also be balanced in our own lives as well. There are times when we must stand up for our principles - for what is right and just and fair, even in our most personal relationships. But our sense of justice must be tempered with love and compassion, with forgiveness and understanding.

Today we begin the new month of Elul, a time of introspection. We look at our lives and our relationships. We assess what's been working for us and what's not. We look at people in our lives whom we love, but who have, from time to time disappointed us or let us down. We know what is fair and just and that we have every right, at a certain level, to act accordingly. But, at the same time, we know that if we want to renew relationships, if we want them to grow, if we want to mature as individuals ourselves, then we need to "auto-fill" and make sure that our "Mishpat" is always colored by "Tzedek." For Gd not only gave us laws to live by, but the ability to balance principle with compassion