

# Torah Weekly

## PARSHAT MISHPATIM SHABBAT SHEKALIM

21 – 27 Shevat 5786  
8 – 14 February 2026

*Parshat Mishpatim: Exodus 21:1 - 24:18*

*Parshat Shekalim: Exodus 30:11-16 Shekalim: Kings II 11:17 - 12:17*

### Psalms for our brethren in the Holy Land

*Psalm 117*

*1. Praise the Lord, all nations, laud Him, all peoples.*

*2. For His kindness has overwhelmed us, and the truth of the Lord is eternal. Hallelujah!*

*(Please say Chapter 20 daily)*

### Positive Mitzvah 3: Loving G-d

We are commanded to love G-d. We foster a love for G-d by studying and contemplating His Torah, His commandments, and His awesome deeds. Through studying and meditating about G-d we come to have somewhat of an understanding of His greatness—which automatically spawns a deep love for Him. This mitzvah also includes sharing our knowledge of G-d with others, and calling upon our fellows to serve Him. After all, if we love G-d, we'd surely sing His praises before all who are ready to hear.

*Sacred material please do not desecrate*

### Aleph Institute

*Hyman & Martha Rogal Center*  
5804 Beacon Street  
Pittsburgh, PA 15217  
412-421-0111  
Fax:412-521-5948  
www.AlephNE.org  
info@AlephNE.org



### WHY PIERCE A JEWISH SERVANT'S EAR IF HE WISHES TO STAY?

Following the 10 Commandments given at Mount Sinai, Parshat Mishpatim opens with the laws of the Jewish indentured servant:

*And these are the ordinances that you shall set before them. Should you buy a Hebrew slave, he shall work [for] six years, and in the seventh [year], he shall go out to freedom without charge. .... But if the slave says, "I love my master, my wife, and my children. I will not go free," his master shall bring him to the judges, and he shall bring him to the door or to the doorpost, and his master shall bore his ear with an awl, and he shall serve him forever.*

This passage raises several questions—most glaringly, the significance of ear piercing and why it is performed specifically by the door. Furthermore, why does the Torah introduce its extensive legal rulings in Parshat Mishpatim with this particular set of laws?

**1. So That it Would Be Apparent to All** Rashbam writes that the ear was pierced simply as a sign of slavery, and it was done by the doorpost so that everyone could witness that this individual was now a permanent slave. Some add that this had to take place at the door to the public domain to ensure that it was well documented.

#### 2. The Ear Heard "Do Not Steal"

Rashi, based on the Talmud and Mechilta, cites no less than three explanations: two for why the ear was pierced, and one for why it was done adjacent to the door.

The first explanation cited by Rashi is found in the Mechilta and is predicated on the understanding that the servant in question is one who stole and was unable to repay the victim, and was thus sold to work off his debt:

*And why was the ear chosen to be pierced rather than any other limb? Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai would explain this in a beautiful manner: The ear that heard "You shall not steal" and yet the person went and stole—that ear shall be pierced above all his other limbs.*

(According to this understanding, the eighth of the Ten Commandments would also refer to monetary theft. However, Rashi seems to indicate that it refers exclusively to kidnapping. Perhaps this is why Rashi offers a second explanation.

#### 3. The Ear Heard "For the Children of Israel Are Slaves to Me"

The second interpretation quoted by Rashi is lifted from the Talmud in Tractate Kiddushin:

*Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai would expound this verse in a beautiful manner: Why is the ear different from all the other limbs in the body, as the ear alone is pierced? The Holy One, Blessed be He,*

*said: This ear heard My voice on Mount Sinai when I said: "For to Me the children of Israel are slaves" (Leviticus 25:55), which indicates: And they should not be slaves to slaves. And yet this man went and acquired a master for himself. Therefore, let this ear be pierced.*

Taking these two explanations into account, the Rebbe explains why these laws are among the first to be discussed right after the giving of the Torah, despite the fact that they would not become applicable for many years to come due to the great wealth the Jews amassed during the Exodus. This commandment is fundamentally connected to the Ten Commandments, the Rebbe explains, as the indentured servant represents the antithesis of freely serving G-d.

#### 4. The Door G-d Passed Over During the Plague of the Firstborn

The explanation Rashi provides for why this had to take place by the door is the continuation of the Talmud quoted above.

*And Rabbi Shimon bar Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi would likewise expound this verse in a beautiful manner: Why are the door and a doorpost different from all other objects in the house, that the piercing is performed with them? The Holy One, Blessed be He, said: The door and the doorpost were witnesses in Egypt when I passed over the lintel and when I passed over the two doorposts of houses in which there were Jews (Exodus, chapter 12), and I said: "For to Me the children of Israel are slaves," and they should not be slaves to slaves. And I delivered them at that time from slavery to freedom, and yet this man went and acquired a master for himself. Therefore, let him be pierced before them, as they are witnesses that he violated G-d's will.*

It is interesting to note a variation of this teaching as it appears in the Jerusalem Talmud:

*Rabbi Eliezer ben Yaakov taught: Why [is the ear pierced] by the door? Because it was through the door that they went from slavery to freedom.*

#### 5. It Was an Unnoticeable Mark

The Rebbe extensively analyzes the Rashi cited above, raising several questions.

Rashi begins by citing the Talmud, which uses a gezeirah shavah (one of the 13 hermeneutical principles that connects identical words in different passages) to establish that only the right ear is pierced. If Rashi's goal is to explain the reasoning behind this unique command, why does he start with that? This seems to be a

standalone teaching rather than an explanation for why the ear is pierced.

Additionally, Rashi's final explanation—regarding why the door was specifically chosen as the designated "piercing zone" (as cited above)—has nothing to do with the ear. Why, then, does Rashi insert it here, in his commentary about the words "his master shall bore his ear with an awl," instead of placing it on the phrase "bring him to the door?"

Due to these and other difficulties, the Rebbe explains that Rashi is not addressing why the ear was chosen for piercing. Rather, the question here is: why specifically the right ear?

The Rebbe explains that while the punishment of the indentured servant may seem excessively harsh and degrading, the reality is quite the opposite. The ear was chosen for piercing precisely because it would not be particularly conspicuous—many people voluntarily pierce their ears to wear earrings.

If this were the reasoning, however, one would expect the less dominant ear—the left—to be chosen. This is why Rashi cites the Talmud, which clarifies that the right ear was chosen based on the principle of gezeirah shavah.

But this, in turn, raises another difficulty: the fact that it had to be specifically the right ear suggests that the reason for the piercing was not merely that it should be subtle. If inconspicuousness was the goal, why insist on the right ear?

To resolve this, Rashi cites the deeper explanations—even though they deviate from the straightforward reading of the verse—namely, that this is the ear that heard at Sinai. Since the piercing serves as a reminder of what was heard, the more dominant ear is chosen. This also explains why this particular punishment was instituted, now that we have dismissed the idea that it was meant as an unobtrusive penalty.

We now also understand why Rashi includes the explanation about the door in this context. Once we establish that this ritual carries deep symbolic meaning—serving as a reminder of the ear that heard at Mount Sinai, rather than merely a subtle mark of slavery—Rashi highlights additional symbolism. Specifically, the door represents the doorposts in Egypt.

#### 6. To Make it Difficult for Him

Rabbi Abraham, the son of Maimonides, understood this process as a means to discourage the servant from remaining with the household. It was designed to make him despise his attachment to worldly matters, which he chose over devotion to his faith. Ultimately, this would lead him to seek true freedom—

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returning to liberty, his rightful state, and to serving G-d.

### 7. It is a Reminder of the Slavery in Egypt

Tosafot and the Chizkuni quote a Midrash, also cited as the Jerusalem Talmud:

*The Holy One, blessed be He, said, "I decreed that Israel would be enslaved for 400 years, but I skipped the designated time for their sake and shortened their servitude. Yet this person went and enslaved himself—therefore, he shall be pierced with an instrument whose numerical value equals 400, which is the awl (מַצְרָע)."*

### 8. A Lesson in Divine Service

The Rebbe uses these laws to draw an important lesson in our service of G-d.

There are those so immersed in physicality that they become slaves to their material desires. Even when the seventh day—Shabbat—arrives, offering them the chance to break free, they refuse to detach themselves from their love of worldly matters.

Regarding this, the Torah warns: *"For to Me, the children of Israel are slaves."* A person's purpose in this world is to serve G-d through studying Torah and performing mitzvot. True freedom can only be achieved through Torah study, the Mishnah explains: *"There is no one as free as one who engages in Torah study."* And this personal freedom will ultimately lead to true global freedom ushered in with the coming of Moshiach.

By Mordechai Rubin

**RABBI HASDAI CRESCAS**  
(5110-5180; 1340-1410)

One of the greatest scholars and main pillars of Judaism during the dark period of the Jewish persecutions in Spain, was Rabbi Hasdai, the son of Rabbi Judah Crescas.

Rabbi Hasdai Crescas was born in Barcelona, Spain, in the year 5110 (1340), in a noble family that had been famous for its scholars and leaders in Jewry for generations. At an early age he proved himself worthy of his noble family. He was blessed with an unusually sharp and clear mind, and with an iron will to learn everything possible of the Torah and Talmud. He was soon sent to Gerona, then the seat of a famous academy of the Talmud, headed by the most famous Talmudist of that time, Rabbi Nissim Gerondi (of Gerona), better known as the RaN, the author of the commentary on the RIF (Rabbi Isaac Alfasi). In Gerona Rabbi Hasdai studied together with another great student of the Talmud, Rabbi Isaac ben Sheshet, the famous RIBaSH, author of many decisions (Responsa) regarding the Talmud and practical Jewish law.

In the year 1367 a wave of cruel persecution broke out in Barcelona, when the Jews were accused, falsely of course, that they had desecrated religious articles of the Church. King Pedro IV of Aragon ordered the arrest of Rabbi Nissim and Rabbi Hasdai

and other important Jews, who were thrown into the Barcelona prison. Although their innocence was clear from the start, and was soon proved also in Court, they were kept in prison for several months, and were released only after a large sum of money was paid as "bail." After his release Rabbi Hasdai Crescas moved to another city in Spain, Saragossa, where he spent the rest of his life.

Rabbi Hasdai was welcomed with great honor by the Saragossa Jewish community and was even offered the position of Chief Rabbi. However, Rabbi Hasdai did not accept the position, wishing to devote his time to his studies. Nevertheless, he was always ready to offer his services, advice and the fruits of his learning to his brethren. The Jews of Saragossa, and of many other cities, turned to him frequently in all their difficulties. But not the Jews alone, for his wisdom and uprightness were admired also by the royal houses of Aragon and Navarra, and he was often called upon to undertake diplomatic missions for them.

Many young scholars came to Rabbi Hasdai to study under his guidance. Among them were Rabbi Joseph Albo, who became a famous philosopher, and Rabbi Isaac Duran, who also wrote important philosophical works in defense of Judaism against the attacks of Christian clergymen.

Another wave of persecution burst upon the Jews of Spain in the year 1391. Rabbi Hasdai's son who had gone to Barcelona to bring his bride home, was caught in the mob attacks on the Jews, and was murdered together with many thousands of other Jews. Many other Jews were forced to accept the Catholic faith. In a letter to the Jewish communities of Avignon and other cities in the South of France, Rabbi Hasdai describes these terrible mob attacks, instigated by fanatical monks. Thanks to his influence, the Jewish community of Saragossa was spared the tragic fate of other Jewish communities in Spain.

Hatred of the Jews was continually fanned by the Dominican Vincent Ferrer, the apostate (converted Jew) Paulos of Burgos, and others. At the same time, missionaries were active among the upper classes of the Jews trying to influence them to accept Christianity through "learned" arguments and the threat of violence.

Rabbi Hasdai wrote a treatise in Spanish to show why a Jew had no reason to give up his faith under any circumstances. Unfortunately, the original of that work was lost, but an important part of it was preserved in Hebrew translation by Rabbi Joseph ibn Shemtov. It was called "Bittul Ikrei Hanotzrim," meaning "refutation (denial) of the Christian doctrines. It proved very helpful to many Jews in finding answers to the missionary arguments, and strengthened many a Jewish spirit.

The most important scholarly work of Rabbi Hasdai Crescas is his "Or Hashem," the Light of G-d. In this work he states his views and principles of faith. He does not agree with other philosophers, that only

through knowledge and intellectual searching can man come closest to G-d. The human mind, Rabbi Hasdai declares, is too limited and cannot arrive at the knowledge of G-d no matter how great is his mind. Rather through the love of G-d and the fulfillment of His commands can man come closest to G-d. Rabbi Hasdai also points out the mistakes in the philosophy of Aristotle which was so admired by philosophers in those days. Naturally, such views as Rabbi Hasdai expressed in his "Or Hashem" were not too popular in those days, and this is perhaps the reason why his work was not as widely quoted as the "Ikarim" of his disciple Rabbi Joseph Albo. Nevertheless, his work has greatly influenced Jewish thought for centuries, and has strengthened Jewish loyalty to the Torah and Mitzvot. Rabbi Isaac Abarbanel, a great scholar and philosopher of later years, greatly praised Rabbi Hasdai's work. Rabbi Jacob ben Habib, compiler of the famous work "Ein Yaakov," (Fountain of Jacob), with Aggadic selections from the entire Talmud, was also a great admirer of Rabbi Hasdai's work and used parts of the "Or Hashem" in his work. "Sweeter than honey," he says of Rabbi Hasdai's words of wisdom.

Rabbi Hasdai Crescas lived up to his doctrines that "the greatest human good is the spiritual perfection attained through love of G-d and adherence to the Torah," for he was indeed a saintly and pious man, who spread the Light of G-d in the dark ages of our Exile.

By Nissan Mindel

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### MISHPATIM IN A NUTSHELL

Following the revelation at Sinai, G-d legislates a series of laws for the people of Israel. These include the laws of the indentured servant; the penalties for murder, kidnapping, assault and theft; civil laws pertaining to redress of damages, the granting of loans and the responsibilities of the "Four Guardians"; and the rules governing the conduct of justice by courts of law.

Also included are laws warning against mistreatment of foreigners; the observance of the seasonal festivals, and the agricultural gifts that are to be brought to the Holy Temple in Jerusalem; the prohibition against cooking meat with milk; and the mitzvah of prayer. Altogether, the Parshah of Mishpatim contains 53 mitzvot—23 imperative commandments and 30 prohibitions.

G-d promises to bring the people of Israel to the Holy Land, and warns them against assuming the pagan ways of its current inhabitants.

The people of Israel proclaim, "We will do and we will hear all that G-d commands us." Leaving Aaron and Hur in charge in the Israelite camp, Moses ascends Mount Sinai and remains there for forty days and forty nights to receive the Torah from G-d.

## IN JEWISH HISTORY

**Sunday, February 8, 2026 – 21 Shevat, 5786**  
**First Jew Granted Residence in England (1657)**

On February 4, 1657, Oliver Cromwell, Lord Protector of England, issued the first residence permit to a Jew, Luis Carvajal, since the expulsion of all Jews from England by King Edward I in the year 1290. The edict of expulsion had been officially overturned in the previous year, 1656. The re-admittance of Jews into England was partially due to the efforts of the great scholar Rabbi Menasseh Ben Israel.

**Monday, February 9, 2026**  
**22 Shevat, 5786**

**Rebbitzin's Yahrzeit (1988)**

Rebbitzin Chaya Mushkah Schneerson (b. 1901), wife of the Lubavitcher Rebbe, passed away on the 22nd of Shevat of the year 5748 (1988). Chabad's annual international conference of sheluchot (woman "emissaries") is held on or near this date.

**Tuesday, February 10, 2026 – 23 Shevat, 5786**  
**War on Benjamin (circa 1228 BCE)**

Armies of the Tribes of Israel converged upon the tribe of Benjamin in the aftermath of the "Concubine at Givah" incident, in a war which nearly brought about the extinction of the Benjaminites (as related in the Book of Judges, chapters 19-2). The event occurred during the judgeship of Othniel ben Knaz, who led the people of Israel in the years 2533-2573 from creation (1228-1188 BCE).