

**Parshat Mishpatim
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“I love Jeremy Lin!”**

Show of hands – how many of you watched a Knicks Basketball game on TV in the past week or two? How many of you watched a Knicks Basketball game in the five years before that? It's Linsanity! Since the incredible arrival of Jeremy Lin – the unlikely Harvard grad Asian-American NBA star whose story has captured the hearts of people all across the world – viewership of Knicks games has increased 109%. I'm hooked and I'm not ashamed to admit it. As stories go, this one has everything – drama, the underdog who raises his team to untold heights, I mean how can you not love this guy – Jeremy Lin from Harvard who even has with teammate Landry Fields who is a Stanford graduate – they have what they call the “Geek handshake” – that has been described as the nerdiest handshake in the NBA – but they have also been called the smartest back court in the NBA – what a story. And if all of this was not enough – Jeremy Lin becomes the reason that David Brooks quotes the Rav, Joseph Soleveitchik on the editorial page of the New York Times – I mean is this great or what? Linsanity.

Because if the Jeremy Lin story was not crazy enough – an unknown kid – who had never played seriously in the NBA before – days before being cut from his third NBA team, who is sleeping on his brothers couch because he doesn't think he is going to be around long enough to make it worth renting an apartment – and then goes from there to the cover of Sports Illustrated Magazine and outscores Kobe Bryant in a head to head matchup – well it turns out he is also deeply religious – and when it comes to religion and sports – well see my Tim Tebow sermon.

But David Brooks, the New York Times Op-Ed columnist sees a fundamental problem in the religious sports hero. He argues that the moral ethos of sport is in tension with the moral ethos of faith, whether Jewish, Christian or Muslim. “The moral universe of sport,” argues Brooks, “is oriented around victory and supremacy. The sports hero tries to perform great deeds in order to win glory and fame...his job is to defeat his opponents and avoid the oblivion that goes with defeat. The modern sports hero is competitive and ambitious. He is theatrical. He puts himself on display. He is assertive, he is proud and intimidating. He makes himself the center of attention when the game is on the line...His primary virtue is courage...this is what we go to sporting events to see.” Brooks goes on to argue that this sporting ethos pervades modern life and shapes how we think about business, academic and political competition. And then he suggests that this ethos violates the religious ethos on many levels. “The religious ethos,” Brooks argues, is about redemption, self-abnegation and surrender to God. Ascent in the sports universe is a straight shot. You set your goal, and you climb toward greatness. But ascent in the religious universe often proceeds by a series of inversions: You have to be willing to lose yourself; to gain everything you have to be willing to give up everything; the last shall be first; it's not about you. For many religious teachers, humility is the primary virtue (sound like a recent sermon?). You achieve loftiness of spirit by performing the most menial of services. (That's why shepherds are perpetually becoming kings in the Bible.) You achieve your identity through self-effacement. You achieve strength by acknowledging your weaknesses.

And this is being discussed on the editorial page of the New York Times, thanks to Jeremy Lin!

So how do we reconcile these seemingly irreconcilable contradictions between the ideal as envisioned by the sports hero and the ideal as envisioned by the religious hero? You don't – argues Brooks. The two moral universes are irreconcilable, he argues – and then, as if this was not great enough – he goes on to quote the Rav – Joseph Soloveitchik from his master work “The Lonely Man of Faith” where Soloveitchik puts forth his concept of the dual nature of man based on his close reading of the early chapter of the torah – where he highlights that there are two creation stories – leading him to refer to Adam 1 and Adam 2. Adam one, if you read the story carefully, is the part of us that creates, discovers, competes and is involved in the building of the world. Adam 2 is the spiritual individual, who is awed, humbled by the universe as a spectator and a worshipper.

But what I love about Soloveitchik and by extension Brooks – what I love about Judaism is that the two are presented as an irreconcilable contradiction. For Soloveitchik – it is not either/or, but both. The message of Brooks in presenting Jeremy Lin the religious sports hero is that one need not choose but rather one needs to learn to live with the contradiction. This is not an American solution – not even a Christian or Muslim solution – but it is a deeply Jewish one – and there it is on the editorial page of the New York Times. Americans don't like contradictions – we like things simple – for us a contradiction is a problem to be solved.

Even for our Christian friends – there is a struggle to resolve this dilemma by giving ascendancy to the religious over the secular – Jeremy Lin himself gives voice to this desire to reconcile the irreconcilable when he stated, “I wanted to do well for myself and my team. How can I possibly give that up and play selflessly for God?”

Muslims clearly argue that the religious voice must triumph over the secular one – it is only in Judaism where the contradiction lives, is celebrated, nurtured and preserved as a creative tension that is to be embraced – not resolved, understood and not eliminated.

What Brooks presents on the editorial page of the New York Times, what Soloveitchik introduced us to in his “Lonely Man of Faith” and what I have been preaching to you week after week from this very bema – is at the very heart of our way of thinking. You will find this core tension no matter where you look in our sacred tradition. Take this week's torah portion – Mishpatim.

Last week we read of the dramatic events as the children of Israel stood at the foot of Mt. Sinai - this week the details of many of the laws that follow from that moment. And you know the two famous *midrashim* about this moment. These *midrashim* that attempt to explain details that are omitted from the Biblical story - the rabbis using their imagination or better yet their sense of deduction - try and fill in the blanks, the spaces, the gaps in the Biblical accounting of events. So there are two famous versions of what exactly happened to cause the children of Israel to accept the Torah at the foot of Mount Sinai. For sake of time I will summarize them briefly - you may remember them in more detail -version 1 tells of God coming with the gift of the torah filled with its many laws and requirements and the children of Israel responding joyfully and immediately - *naaseh v'nishmai* - “We will do and we will hearken to all that God asks of us”! Version 2 has a very different take on the sequence of events back at the foot of Sinai. In this version the children of Israel were not so eager and not so joyful in their desire to accept all these laws and requirements - Kashrut, Shabbat, hundreds and hundreds of laws and details - not so fast this sounds pretty daunting - and in this rabbinic recreation of events the Israelites are so reluctant that God loses his patience, uproots Mount Sinai from its place and holds the mountain over the

heads of the gathered Israelites and informs them that if they accept His torah he will restore the mountain to its place, if they continue to resist, He will drop it on their heads and that will be the end of them - so now, God continues, let Me return to My question - will you accept My torah or not? And then and only then the children of Israel cry out - *naaseh v'nishma* - "we will do and we will hearken"! Those not familiar with Judaism will protest - well they can't both be true! They represent opposite and contradictory versions of events - "a thing and its opposite cannot both be true" - they might protest.

But those of you who have sat here week after week, year after year know that in the world of Judaism and thing and its opposite not only can be true - it usually is. Yes, in the world of objective reality - in the world of science and math - a thing and its opposite cannot both be true. $1+1=2$ and no matter how many times you do the math it will always equal 2 and only 2. But in the world of the rabbis, not only can a thing and its opposite both be true - they usually are, and sometimes that can both be true at the same time!

Allow me to prove this to you. True or false, "I wake up in the morning and I feel that the world is a wonderful place, I can't wait to get out of bed and meet the day, embrace the challenge, bask in the sun and take hold of the opportunities that lay before me - I love life and all that it represents!" True or false? Wait, before you answer, I have another question: "True or false? I wake up in the morning and I feel that the world is a miserable place, I don't want to get out of bed, I pull the covers over my head and wish I could go back to sleep. I want to avoid all the terrible responsibilities that I know will confront me, I am afraid of the challenges that will present themselves to me - I hate life and all that it represents!"

At that point you might well say - "they are both true and they are both false. Some days one accurately describes my mood, some days the other captures precisely how I feel."

Judaism is based on the notion that in the world of the soul - a thing and its opposite can indeed both be true. Why two stories of what happened at Sinai?

Version 1 - the one where God offers the torah and without demanding any of the details the children of Israel respond - *naaseh v'nishma* - "we will do and we will understand" - even the order of the words are telling. They should have been the opposite - first you understand then you commit. *Nishma* should precede *naaseh*. But this response is the essence of rashness and impetuosity. Accepting a bargain before you know what the terms of the deal are? Make a commitment to action before you understand the extent of the action you are being asked to commit to? Who does such things? No wonder the Talmud calls the Israelites a rash, impetuous people!

And this gave rise to Version 2 - here our ancestors were the very opposite of impetuous and rash - they were reluctant to the point of being obstinate. Here was God who was revealing Himself in a way that mankind had never experienced before. In a pyrotechnic display that had never before been witnessed, but in a display, that was nothing short of miraculous - God Himself - *b'atzmo, v'b'chvodo* - offers this people who had just witnessed Gods power and might with the miracle of the Red Sea and now this all Powerful God who created heaven and earth comes to them and says I have a gift for you, I want you to accept My Torah - and the people respond, "hold on, not so fast, don't sign that contract till our attorneys review it - you never know what God might have hidden in the small print. After all - look how He bamboozled old Pharaoh! No, I am sorry God, You will just have to be patient till our attorneys - and wow - look at all this stuff about giving charity - we better

get the tax guys in here to take a look at this as well - I tell you what God - thanks for the first look, and we'll get back to you as soon as we can - I'll have my people call your people and we'll set up a lunch - say next week some time? Ciao baby."

Now, I admit, I have taken a few liberties with the text of the *midrash* - but can we blame God for taking the mountain and holding it over the people's head and saying "your move - accept my Torah or ciao baby it will be!" In this version we meet an Israel that is rational in the extreme - cynical, doubting and skeptical. This is an Israel that we would recognize very much today - it is one that approaches matters logically and rationally - it demands verification and explanation - it won't be rushed into anything and if it errs - it will err on the side of caution - it has been burnt too many times before.

So we read both versions of the events at the foot of Mt. Sinai - we read both *midrashim* - and we come to understand - they both are true, they both capture truth and each represents a piece of who we are - we are at one and the same time - skeptics and believers - faithful and faithless. It is what makes us humans so fascinating and so frustrating.

And that is what Jeremy Lin will have to learn – and maybe we can learn through him – that it is not a matter of either/or – but how he can embrace both aspects of his life – as the sports hero and the religious soul. As Brooks says, "Jeremy Lin is now living the creative contradiction. Much of the anger that arises when religion mixes with sport or with politics comes from people who want to deny that this contradiction exists and who want to live in a world in which there is only one morality, one set of qualities and where everything is easy, un-tragic and clean. Life and religion are more complicated than that." To which I merely add: amen.