

# Torah Portion Preview for Mishpatim

*Shabbat beginning February 17, 2023*

Mishpatim (Rules) contains ancient Israel's legal codes that we can sort into multiple dimensions. Separate laws address women, men, slaves, wrongful death, injury, property damage, money lending, behavior toward strangers, parents, birth order, sexuality, and idolatry. Nevertheless, marriage, adoption, and inheritance are still omitted. Offenses to God are highlighted as well as commands to observe the Sabbath and our Passover, Shavuot, and Sukkot festivals. Reminiscent of Yitro's advice for Moses to "enjoin upon them the laws and the teachings and make known to them the way they are to go and the practices they are to follow," Moses set up an altar with 12 pillars for the 12 tribes, made sacrifices, and read the commandments.

Taking these laws out of their context in time and place results in naïve understandings in several dimensions. Though freed from slavery in Egypt, the ancient Israelites, like most agricultural societies, could free themselves from neither enslavement of others nor male domination. Some laws had kind intentions for the time, but opportunities for such freedoms emerged only gradually with modern technology. The 1793 cotton gin fueled slavery, while the mid-twentieth century cotton harvester, synthetic fabrics, and factory jobs enabled a less violent "Second Great Emancipation."