



Table Talk

Table Talk: Mishpatim

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Want to eliminate most traffic jams? It's easy. Every driver has to know and agree to this simple rule: Maintain an equal distance from the car in front of you and the car behind you at all times. Easy, right? Except it's not—because human nature mucks things up. You can't control the car behind you and you can't help rushing when you're late. Self-driving cars might solve this problem for us someday, but, until then, we're stuck with flawed humans and lots of congested traffic.

But does that mean we're helpless? Does that mean have no responsibility to wrestle with mundane ethical decisions like whether or not to change lanes and pass a slower driver? In *Mishpatim* this week, the Israelites receive a long list of laws. Some of them seem vague ("You shall not tolerate a sorceress"). Some of them seem obvious ("You shall not oppress a stranger, for you know the feelings of the stranger...."). And some of them seem arbitrary ("You shall not boil a kid in its mother's milk").

The laws serve specific purposes, to be sure, and some of those specific purposes may no longer be relevant in today's society. But they also serve the purpose of asking flawed human beings to consider the little things they do and how those things connect them to their fellow humans and to God. Sometimes the smallest ethical decisions—such as maintaining an equal distance from the car in front of your and the car behind you—can have profound meaning. Sometimes it suggests you're thinking of how God wants you to behave and how everything you do affects other people. And when that happens, it's no small thing at all.

This Shabbat, consider these questions:

1. Are there any rules in your household that you follow even though you wish you didn't have to? Why do you follow them?
2. If you're a vegetarian or if you keep kosher, do you feel more spiritual or more ethical for following those dietary rules?
3. *Mishpatim* includes rules for the treatment of slaves. Can you think of any reasons why the Torah would not abolish slavery?