



Torah portion – Mishpatim / Gili Katz

Illustration: Inbal Weissman

Parashat Mishpatim deals with commandments and laws concerning relationships between people, and the consequences of various types of harm—matters which in our time require the involvement of lawyers and courts. The parashah is a direct and detailed continuation of some of the Commandments we read in last week’s portion, Parashat Yitro.

Mishpatim—laws, statutes, rules—set boundaries between desirable and accepted behavior and behavior that is undesirable or even forbidden.

Family Discussion

1. Find as many synonyms as possible for the word “boundary.”

(Line, fence, barrier, border, limit, threshold, edge, ceiling, perimeter, separation, distinction, and more.)

2. What are your boundaries?

To answer this question, think: What would you absolutely never do? What would you absolutely never agree to give up? Are boundaries different from person to person? Do boundaries change with age?

The Land to which the Israelites are headed is mentioned in this parashah, along with God’s promise to help them conquer it.

The Israelites, who had never seen the Land of Canaan, needed to imagine it based on stories passed down from Jacob and his sons, who had gone down to Egypt before the period of enslavement.

Where does this land begin? Where does it end? What are its boundaries?

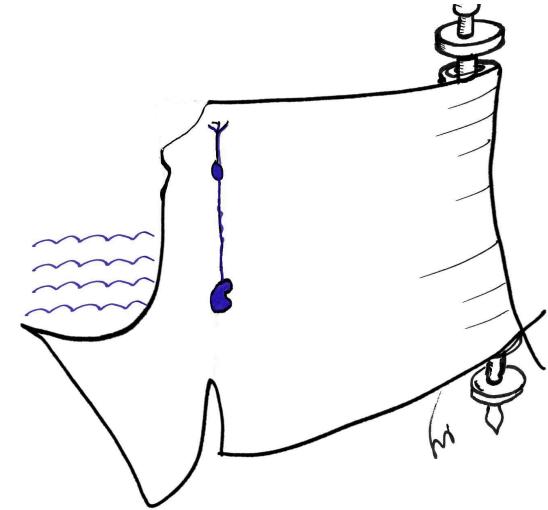
“And I will set your border from the Sea of Reeds to the Sea of the Philistines, and from the wilderness to the River; for I will deliver the inhabitants of the land into your hand, and you shall drive them out before you.”

(Exodus 23:31)

3. Can you draw the borders of the land according to this verse?

There are several difficulties:

- **“From the Sea of Reeds”** – The Sea of Reeds (Red Sea) is long. Does the border follow its entire length, or only from its eastern or western edge?





- **“The Sea of the Philistines”** – This is the only place in the Bible where this location appears by that name. It refers to the Mediterranean Sea. Consider the wording and suggest why this expression was chosen (hint: Exodus 13:17).
- **“From the desert wilderness”** – Which wilderness, and where does it begin?
- **“To the River”** – Which river? In the Torah, when “the River” is mentioned without specification, it refers to the Euphrates River. Where is it located?

4. Are the borders of the land clear to you now? Why or why not?

5. Read the descriptions of the borders of the land in other places in the Torah.

Notice the differences in wording as well as the differences in the locations mentioned (try counting the different place-names that define the borders).

The borders of the land in the promise to Abraham:

“On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram, saying: To your offspring I have given this land, from the River of Egypt to the great river, the Euphrates River: the Kenite, the Kenizzite, the Kadmonite, the Hittite, the Perizzite, the Rephaim, the Amorite, the Canaanite, the Girgashite, and the Jebusite.”

(Genesis 15:18–21)

The borders of the land in this week's parashah, after the Exodus from Egypt:

“And I will set your border from the Sea of Reeds to the Sea of the Philistines, and from the wilderness to the River; for I will deliver the inhabitants of the land into your hand, and you shall drive them out before you.”

(Exodus 23:31)

The borders of the land at the beginning of Moses' speech in Deuteronomy:

“Turn and journey, and come to the hill country of the Amorites and to all their neighbors in the Arabah, in the hill country, in the lowland, in the Negev, and by the seacoast—the land of the Canaanites and Lebanon—as far as the great river, the Euphrates River.”

(Deuteronomy 1:7)



The Borders of the Land Before the Division into Tribal Inheritances

“...For you are coming into the land of Canaan; this is the land that shall fall to you as an inheritance—the land of Canaan according to its borders. Your southern side shall be from the wilderness of Zin along the side of Edom; your southern border shall begin at the end of the Salt Sea on the east. The border shall turn from the south to the ascent of Akrabbim, pass along to Zin, and its limit shall be south of Kadesh-barnea; then it shall go out to Hazar-addar and pass on to Azmon.

The border shall turn from Azmon to the Brook of Egypt, and its limit shall be at the sea.

For the western border, you shall have the Great Sea as a border; this shall be your western border.

This shall be your northern border: from the Great Sea you shall mark out your line to Mount Hor.

From Mount Hor you shall mark out to Lebo-hamath, and the limit of the border shall be at Zedad.

The border shall go out to Ziphron, and its limit shall be at Hazar-enan; this shall be your northern border.

You shall mark out your eastern border from Hazar-enan to Shepham.

The border shall go down from Shepham to Riblah on the east side of Ain; then the border shall go down and reach the eastern slope of the Sea of Kinneret.

The border shall go down along the Jordan, and its limit shall be at the Salt Sea. This shall be your land according to its borders all around.”

Moses commanded the children of Israel, saying: “This is the land that you shall inherit by lot, which the Lord commanded to give to the nine tribes and the half-tribe.

For the tribe of the Reubenites according to their fathers' houses, and the tribe of the Gadites according to their fathers' houses, and the half-tribe of Manasseh have taken their inheritance.

The two tribes and the half-tribe have taken their inheritance beyond the Jordan opposite Jericho, eastward.”

(Numbers 34:2–15)

Matot – another word for tribes.

What did you understand about the borders of the Land from reading the various sources and comparing them?

The Borders of the Land – The Borders of Desire

“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. And the earth was chaos and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep, and the spirit of God hovered over the face of the waters... And God called the dry land Earth.”

(Genesis 1:1–2, 10)



“And God called the dry land Earth’ — why was it called *eretz* (earth)? Because it *desired* (*ratzta*) to do the will of its Creator. Rabbi Natan in the name of Rabbi Acha, and Rabbi Berechiah in the name of Rabbi Yitzchak said: ‘I am God Almighty (El Shaddai)’ (Genesis 31) — I am the One who said to the heavens and the earth: ‘Enough!’ For if not, they would have continued stretching outward until now...” (Bereishit Rabbah 5:8)

The Midrash teaches that the name *eretz* (earth/land) hints at the quality of *ratzon* (will or desire). The dry land is called *eretz* because it “wants” to fulfill the will of the Holy One (its “Owner” — a title for God as “Creator of heaven and earth”).

What does the earth do? It brings forth crops, trees, and flowers; it serves as fertile ground for human beings and animals — and what else?

The word *eretz* is not merely a geographical location. The Midrash teaches that its root is connected to “desire” — the desire to receive, to act, to influence, to grow and develop.

This desire also exists within the human being. Therefore, when the Torah speaks of *eretz*, it alludes not only to land but also to this inner desire within us — the desire to live, to experience, to realize our potential, and to grow.

In this parashah we see a remarkable connection: the borders of the land are defined together with the laws and commandments. The Torah teaches us about the human being: just as the land requires boundaries in order to fulfill its purpose and flourish, so too our desire needs boundaries — in order to fulfill our mission, protect ourselves and others, and experience true freedom.

This is an important lesson for the Israelites who left Egypt, emerging from slavery and now needing to define their true will — as individuals, as a society, and as a people.

Today is my birthday — a time for self-reflection about my own desires. One of the things I want is to continue learning Torah and teaching Torah. Thank you for reading and learning what I write, and for giving me the strength to continue.

If we examine this desire, we see that it exists within boundaries. I do not learn all of the Torah — rather, I focus on the weekly Torah portion (and sometimes additional topics). I learn in a way that enables me to prepare a study page by Friday morning each week. The boundaries I have set for my learning help me carry out the task I have taken upon myself — so that it will not be too overwhelming, will not “spread out” endlessly, and will leave me with energy and a sense of wanting more.

On one’s birthday it is customary to add extra Torah study beyond the regular routine — and so I am adding a little more:

My name appears in the Book of Joel as a verb:

“Fear not, O land; rejoice (“Gili”) and be glad, for the Lord has done great things.”

(Joel 2:21)

You can read the verse in its broader context in Joel chapter 2. The chapter is very vivid and includes some frightening descriptions — but it ends well.

We can also relate just to this verse on its own.



1. Rashi's Commentary:

“Fear not, O land” — this refers to the Land of Israel, *if you return in repentance*.

The “land” is the Land of Israel.

How can a land repent?

Use what we learned at the beginning of the page to help you think about this.

2. Malbim's Commentary:

“Rejoice and be glad” — The definition (*geder*) of *gilah* (rejoicing) is when something good occurs that one had never imagined at all. About this it says, “for the Lord has done great things.”

If *gilah* refers to something that had never even entered one’s mind, what does this teach us about human desire?

What, then, makes possible the “growth (or revelation) of desire”?

Thank you, God, who enlarges my desire each and every year to learn the weekly Torah portions anew — **with joy and with a good heart**.

Thank you to my family, who support me, listen, and learn with me.

Thank you to my beloved Nadav, who learns with me, listens to me, and translates our learning into English.

Thank you to Inbal for the illustrations and the partnership.

Thank you to my parents, who raised me with love for learning and love for Torah.

And thank you to all of you who learn with me whenever you can — you!

May we have a Sabbath of peace and joy, from Gili and the family.

More resources available on the blog – <https://shabbattable.blog/>

