This past Sunday, I engaged in a passionate discussion with the ten folks who came to discuss Paul Kivel's book on Christian hegemony. Rather than focusing on the documented historical oppression of non-Christians, we focused on Kivel's exploration of how dominant Christian narratives affect how we think. I was personally particularly blown away by his comments on *hope and despair:*

"As I travel doing talks and trainings, I am often asked what keeps me hopeful. I understand the feelings of despair and sense of overwhelm that prompts this question. But I am also somewhat taken aback. . .
When I am asked about what keeps me hopeful, I hear people asking if it is worth it. If they work to make the world better, will it pay off? I think that the dominant focus on hope and reward in the future leads people to think that if they don't have personal hope that their efforts will be rewarded, they have the option to give into despair and inaction."

How many of you feel like Kivel could be speaking to you personally with these words? I sure did!

I struggle with despair all the time. Especially in the currently political discourse, with all of the hate speech various candidates are spewing about each other - let alone about the powerless in our society, and in the world - I often wonder what is the point of trying to accomplish anything to better society. I have heard many of you tell me that the reason it hard for you to think about advocating for climate

policy is that it's impossible not to despair of the possibility that your efforts will have any effect.
And in light of the tension, I want to examine this week's parasha.

Last week, we received revelation, in Parashat Yitro. We received Torah. I don't say that we *read* about receiving revelation, because our tradition holds that each and every Jew who ever lived and who ever will live was physically present at the foot of Mount Sinai, hearing the thunder, seeing the smoke.

But the revelation does not just end with the special of effects at the foot of the mountain. This week's parasha, Mishpatim, begins, v'eileh hamishpatim - "*and* these are the rules," says God to Moses, "that you shall set before the Israelites." And the parasha goes on; four chapters devoid of narrative, but full of some of the most basic laws about how to build a society, from the civil penalty for theft or damages, to how prevent corruption in the courts, and how to keep festivals.

It reminds me of a title of a book by Jewish Buddhist teacher, Jack Kornfeld, *After the Ecstasy, the Laundry.* The measure of a spiritual experience is not how one feels in the moment, but what comes after it. There are still mouths to feed, shmutz to clean up. There is laundry to do. After the high of hearing the thunder, seeing the mountain shimmer in lightening, what do we do next?

The revelation didn't end at the end of last week's parashah. **V**'eileh hamishpatim - "*and* these are the rules." Medieval commentator Rashi teaches that the vav' in

“v’eileh,” the “And” conveys a continuity of narrative. Just as the Ten Commandments were given to the people assembled at Sinai, so were these ordinances how to treat slaves, thieves, animals and strangers. The reminder not to favor the rich in law courts, the rules about how many chances to give a violent animal before killing it, the rule about who is responsible when property is lost or destroyed while under the care of someone other than the owner. These rules do not come *after* revelation, says Rashi. These rules *are* the revelation, as much as the thunderous message, saying “I am Adonai Your God!”

So there’s the spectacle. It’s what gets everybody on the same wavelength, feeling connected, out of their own heads. That part of revelation is the same thing we aspire to when we sing together every Friday night, but on a grander scale. Moral psychologist Jonathan Haight refers to those collective spiritual experiences as a “hive switch,” turning us from our individualistic concerns into a more social animal, receptive to seeing ourselves as part of something larger. It feels really good.

But once we get into that collective ecstatic space, what do we *do* with it? Enlightenment is not the end; it’s the means. We can’t live in it forever, rather, it exists to inform the way we walk in the world for the rest of our lives.

The instructions that we receive once we are all ecstatic together are not about how to stay completely high or completely pure. Mishpatim about how to deal with the nitty gritty of life. How to live together. Not just in the holy blissed-out

space that we might feel during a peak spiritual experience, but how to live together in our messy diversity, when we are dealing with thieves and enemies, slaves, rich and poor. Widows, orphans, and strangers. How do we act reasonably and with compassion when we don't feel as unified as we do in this moment?

Our revelation cannot be complete - indeed, it means nothing - if it does not encompass these questions. One of the most important laws in Torah, repeated in some form 36 times, is repeated twice in Mishpatim: In Chapter 22:20, "You shall not wrong a stranger or oppress him, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt." And then, in 23:9: "You shall not oppress a stranger, for you know the soul of a stranger, having yourselves been strangers in the land of Egypt."

In the moment when we experience ourselves as most chosen, the moment that God's power is revealed to a united community, we are reminded *twice* to think outside of ourselves, to have compassion for the strangers.

Rashi gives a different commentary for each of the two verses about the stranger. For the first passage, he comments, "'You shall not wrong a stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.' If you wrong him, he can wrong you back, and say: 'You also come from strangers!'"

On the second verse, which reminds us that we know the soul of the stranger, he comments, "You know how painful it is to be oppressed."

So in our revelation, we receive a calling to our highest potential selves, the selves that know that to be chosen for revelation means to refuse to inflict the harm that we have experienced onto others. But just in case we can't be motivated by compassion, the revelation also pragmatically warns our more violent, damaged selves to remember how easily the tables can turn. It reminds us that there will always be strangers, and our society will be judged as working society *not* based on whether we somehow eliminate poverty, death, or the conditions that cause displacement - but on how we react to those conditions, how we treat the poor, the widow, and the stranger.

After talking about how irrelevant hope can be, Paul Kivel offers this alternative: "Many spiritual traditions are not hope-centered. In these societies, people have communal responsibilities and obligations because they are focused on maintaining the webs of mutuality and the balance of life. They are mandated to work for justice because it is the right thing to do; it is our responsibility to each other. They aren't future-oriented but focused on the present, inspired by their understanding of what is necessary. Their challenge is to maintain the bonds that exist, not to transform the world." This is the same sensibility that Mishpatim offers. And in that, I actually, perhaps ironically, find a good deal of hope.