The relationship between G-d and the Jewish people is compared to that of husband and wife. The giving of the Torah is like a marriage between the two. Moses ascended on high and G-d descended below – finite connected with infinite and an everlasting union was achieved. The sights that are normally seen were heard and the sounds seen – it was another worldly event and our senses were awakened in a way that was previously unheard of.

The giving of the Torah was the ultimate drama and quite literally an out of body experience. The marriage between G-d and the Jewish people was awesome, amazing, and utterly intense – there are not words to describe the event.

That all happened last week.

This week the Torah portion speaks about property damage, the laws of lending and borrowing, and other civil laws; it sort of feels like a tremendous adrenaline drop. We went from hearing lightning and seeing thunder – utter rapture – to figuring out how to deal with oxen that break our neighbor’s fences.

This transformation from the all-encompassing high, to the seemingly mundane, plays itself out in many ways in our lives. Romantic relationships sometimes start with an emotional infatuation, but they need to be followed by practical commitment if they are going to last.

This week we focus on the details of the laws, how to treat slaves (a very humane system at that), the punishments for murder, kidnapping, assault and theft and how to manage the court system. Also included are laws warning against abuse of strangers; the observance of the seasonal festivals, the prohibition against cooking meat with milk; and the Mitzvah of prayer. Overall, the Parsha of Mishpatim contains 53 Mitzvot.

It might feel a bit like a crash landing after a glorious honeymoon – but it is not. The “honeymoon” or the initial surge of excitement and fascination at the beginning of a new relationship is nothing if it cannot transfer over into practical daily living. Romantic relationships are not
simple, books upon books have been written on the complex topic of relationships and marriage.

The giving of the Torah followed by the civil laws is a paradigm that can shed much light on how to develop a healthy relationship. The drama and excitement of the “wedding ceremony” (Giving of the Torah) shows us that there is a real need for uplifting romance. That aspect of a relationship cannot be ignored. While two people can have a calm and functional relationship without romance – it would not be a complete union. On the other hand, infatuation alone will not lead to much happiness.

This dynamic plays itself out in many circumstances. Think of the thrill of getting your driver’s license at age 16 and compare that to the schlep of driving to school at age 20 – or running mundane errands around town. Think of the thrill of being accepted to college compared to the crunch of studying for midterms. There are many such examples. What would a driver’s license be worth if it wasn’t used for the daily grind – or what would be the value of a college acceptance if it wasn’t followed up by hard work and legitimate achievement?

The spiritual feelings that many of us have after doing a kind favor, enjoying an enlightening Torah class, or sharing a warm Shabbat meal should ideally be followed up with practical effects on the rest of our day. The thrill of a 10 day Birthright experience hopefully impacts the next upcoming semester and brings a person closer to their Jewish identity.

When Shabbat ends, we conclude the day with a small ceremony called Havdalla. Havdalla means separation and the short ceremony celebrates the distinction between Shabbat (a holy day) and the rest of the mundane week. We hold a special candle, which has at least two distinct wicks during Havdalla. Each wick is illuminated with a flame and the two flames intertwine as the prayer is being recited. These two flames represent the light of Shabbat connecting to the light of the upcoming week – transference of the holiness from the day of rest to the busy week up ahead. The idea is not to function in a Shabbat-like way throughout the week, as the entire purpose of Havdalla is to mark distinction! The idea is to take some of the holiness of Shabbat and infuse it into the week ahead. One is meant to work and toil throughout the week, Shabbat is a spiritual respite that can nurture or maybe romanticize, the upcoming week.

The thrill of receiving the Torah at Mt. Sinai infuses the civil laws with a spiritual enthusiasm. There are 613 Mitzvot in the Torah and they can be generalized into three categories. Civil laws called Mishpatim, which is the name of this week’s Torah potion, testimonial laws called Eidut and statues called Chukim.

Mishpatim or the civil laws are logical and would most likely be conceived of by any functional society. You do not necessarily need a divine command to outlaw theft, and kidnapping, or to value honoring one’s parents.

Eidut or testimonial laws are things that bear historical significance like eating matzah on Passover to commemorate the Exodus or eating in a booth called a Sukkah during the holiday of Sukkot to recall the temporary homes that the Jews lived in during their 40 years in the desert. While these are not laws based on logic and reason, they connect us to Jewish culture and way of life. For example, the Passover Seder is possibly the most widely attended Jewish celebration.
The final category known as Chukim or statues, are the Mitzvot based on faith and faith alone. This category includes keeping Kosher, and the use of Mikvah for family purity. Keeping these Mitzvot is perhaps the strongest showing of faith – there is no material gain or intellectual understanding involved in their observance. We separate our meat and milk simply because G-d commanded us to in the Torah – and for no other reason whatsoever.

There are two way to approach the Mishpatim – civil laws. We can compartmentalize our lives; leave the spirituality in the Shul and act as a law-abiding citizen in our secular dealings. We can be happy that the Torah laws overlap with secular law and carry on in this very “kosher way.” Alternatively, we can take a holistic approach to our civil guidelines and recognize that just after G-d delighted us with a phenomenal start to our relationship, G-d then commanded us how to act in society. That is to say, that the commands to treat foreigners properly, manage slaves humanly, the laws of borrowing and lending etc. are divine commands and not just born out of rational thinking.

The message is a push for so much intermingling between our “religious” sensibilities and our secular ones – so that our adherence to the Torah’s civil laws is actually rooted in spirituality and our sensibilities cannot be distinguished so easily.

In a certain sense, we are romanticizing the errands around town, the long drive to school, the cramming for midterms. Imagine every time you drive to the drug store, it’s as if you just got your driver’s license yesterday and this is your first time out on the road. However, all analogies are limited and the thrill of a new license is absolutely nothing compared to grandeur of receiving the Torah. The highest of high descending below and inviting the finite people to connect to the infinite. This thrill can permeate our regular daily actions – the relationship between G-d and the Jewish people can be both practical and other worldly. This is the gift of the Torah, the union of Heaven and Earth.