

The Narrow Bridge

גשר צר מאוד

PARSHA PERSPECTIVES

Short Divrei Torah on Parshas Shoftim

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לע"נ פעסל בת ישראל מנחם / לזכות חילינו

PERSONAL PROTECTION

Rabbi Moshe Schochet

"Judges and officers shall you appoint for yourself in all of your cities..." (16:18)

Rav Moshe Feinstein (Darash Moshe) notes that the word *lecha* - "you," seems superfluous. It is also interesting that *lecha* is written in single form, as we know that the judges and officers were intended for the whole nation. What can we learn from the word *lecha*?

Rav Moshe explains that the Torah is teaching us that in addition to appointing judges and officers for the community, we must also appoint a judge and an officer within ourselves in order to ensure that we are conducting ourselves appropriately. We have to set personal and individual standards, and judge ourselves according to those principles to ensure we each maximize our unique potentials. It is for this reason that the word *lecha* - "for you," is used and written in singular form.

While it is critical to surround ourselves with people who will help us grow, we also need to hold ourselves accountable and not solely rely on other people. As people who desire to become better in every facet of our lives, we must constantly evaluate who we are and who we want to become.

As the month of Elul has arrived, we must keep this approach at the forefront of our hearts and minds so that we can become the best versions of ourselves.

LOOKING INWARDS

Reb Asher Horowitz of Rimanov

"And they shall judge the people with righteous judgment." (16:18)

When one commits a transgression or performs a tactless act, we should not judge him as guilty immediately. First, judge yourself as to what you would do under the same circumstances, then you will be able to judge "with righteous judgment."

SEEING THE FULL PICTURE

Chiddushei HaRim

"And they shall judge the people with righteous judgment." (16:18)

Our Sages (Avos 1:6) teach us, "Judge every man favorably." The words used for "every man," can also be translated as "the entire man." We must not criticize someone for singular acts of which no person is exempt. Rather one should judge an individual based on his entire persona, for then one would probably judge him favorably.

GUARDING OUR GATES

Lubavitcher Rebbe

"Judges and officers shall you appoint for yourself in all of your cities..." (16:18)

The Hebrew word for "cities" used here (*she'arecha*) literally means "gates." The "gates" of our bodies are our ears, eyes, nose, and mouth, through which stimuli from the external world enter our bodies and our personal world. This verse thus requires us to station "judges and officers" to guard these "gates" against the intrusion of any stimuli that could be harmful to our spiritual health.

Through studying the Torah, we learn which influences are beneficial (and therefore permitted) and which are harmful (and therefore forbidden). The job of the "enforcement officer" is to enforce the decisions rendered by the judge. Our inner "officers" are the techniques that each of us needs to cultivate in order to combat the voices within us that oppose the decisions of our inner "judges."

Thus, regarding the Messianic future, G-d only promises to "restore your judges as in former times," but not the enforcement officers. In the Messianic future, negativity will not hold sway over us, so there will be no need for protective measures to ensure that we follow G-d's Will. (Likutei Sichot, vol. 34, pp. 104-105, vol. 14, pp. 277-279) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisniewsky

REMOVING JUDGEMENTS

Rebbe Nachman

"Judges and officers shall you appoint for yourself in all of your cities..." (16:18)

When there is no judgment below, there is judgment Above. (Devarim Rabbah 5:4)

If we ignore our obligation to set up a system of justice on earth, then G-d uses His own system of judgment. All things become His messengers for executing His judgment, instilling clear and pure fear in us. But when we do set up a justice system and judge ourselves, we obviate the need for Heaven to instill fear in us and, consequently, we fear no one and nothing but G-d.

On an individual level, each person can constantly elevate his fear of Heaven by practicing *hitbodedut* (secluded self-introspection). During this daily private conversation with G-d, he should judge and evaluate every one of his actions - past and present - to determine if they were carried out properly.

He should also evaluate his future intentions to see if they are appropriate. A person who engages in self-judgment need not fear anything - the authorities, thieves, or anything else that causes him to be afraid - only G-d Himself. (See Likutey Moharan I, 15:2)

When there is proper judgment and justice on earth, the fear of G-d is established and elevated to its rightful level.

Then people fear G-d because they recognize that He is great, not because they are afraid of punishment. (See Likutey Moharan I, 154)

PRACTICING WHAT WE PREACH

Toldos Yaakov Yosef

"Judges and officers shall you appoint for yourself in all of your cities... and they shall judge the people with righteous judgment." (16:18)

The Torah is telling every person who is in a position of power, whether he is a judge, an officer, etc. that the same criteria and set of rules that you use to judge others you should apply to yourself as well. Demand of yourself the same *yiras shamayim* - fear of G-d - that you demand from those you are judging.

EQUALITY IN JUDGEMENT

Toldos Yaakov Yosef

"Judges and officers shall you appoint for yourself in all of your cities... and they shall judge the people with righteous judgment." (16:18)

The words "for yourself" are to teach us that the same judgment you render your friend, you should render "for yourself." Do not judge someone else harshly and yourself leniently.

APPLYING SAFEGUARDS

Rabbi Moshe Kormornick

"Judges and officers shall you appoint for yourself in all of your cities..." (16:18)

From the seemingly redundant inclusion of the words "for yourself" in this verse, the Shelah understands that the Torah is telling us that the Jewish People not only had to set up physical protection around their cities, but that each individual was required to place personal safeguards upon himself. Specifically, "judges" refers to the decision that one makes, and the "enforcement officers" are the means of self-enforcing these decisions. Furthermore, the "gates" which need protecting refer to parts of the body that are constantly facing external challenges. (Rashi translates "gates" as "cities" but the Shelah is understanding from the unusual choice of word, that the Torah is hinting to something deeper. Specifically, the "gates" refer to the body's orifices which require greater protection.)

Essentially, the Shelah is telling us something very simple to understand but very difficult to put into practice: the necessity for us to make appropriate decisions and then to ensure that they are self-enforced through strong willpower without being overruled by base desires.

Indeed, the Kuzari explains that it is this strength of character alone that defines someone as being "devout" (specifically, a "Chassid") - a description surpassing a *tzaddik*! (Mesillas Yesharim, chap. 13)

Someone known to have incredible self-control in the minutia of every movement was Rav Elyashiv. In fact, the chief psychologist of the Israeli Air Force once saw Rav Elyashiv at a wedding without knowing who he was and could not take his eyes off him. When questioned why he was staring at the "stranger" who had just walked into the room, he responded, "I have never seen anyone display such self-control in my entire life!"

Where did Rav Elyashiv gain mastery over himself to such a degree?

The *Rav* himself once answered this question: When he was a young man, the world-class Chazzan Yossele Rosenblatt was performing in Yerushalayim. Excited to hear the famous cantor, Rav Elyashiv made his way to the concert. But along the way, he had a thought: "Is going to the concert going to further my relationship with Hashem more than sitting with a Gemara for the next few hours?" As difficult as the decision was, Rav Elyashiv knew the answer. He turned around and headed back to the *beis medrash*.

Rav Elyashiv would credit his great success in self-control and Torah to that single decision.

Self-control in every action may be far beyond us, but if we try to apply safeguards where necessary and constantly question our actions and behavior, then we will be one step closer to achieving high levels of greatness.

FROM THE HEART

Rabbi Aryeh Dachs

"Judges and officers shall you appoint for yourself in all of your cities... and they shall judge the people with righteous judgment." (16:18)

There is an old joke where a father is talking to his son before his bar mitzvah. The father explains to his son that now that he is becoming a bar mitzvah, he must start taking his obligations seriously. When in *shul*, he needs to focus on the prayers. The boy must respect the hallowed sanctuary; he can no longer talk or horse around during the services. The young boy looked up at his father and innocently asked, "Nu... Father, when will you become a bar mitzvah?" Of course, this joke is a play on the obvious lack of effect a hypocritical sermon will provide.

Parashas Shoftim, begins with the command for the Jewish People to establish *shoftim*, judges, and *shotrim*, those who implement the judgments. More specifically, the *shotrim* are tasked with delivering lashes for those that violated specific Torah mandates. The Midrash explains that the *shotrim* must be like the *shoftim*. Just as it is imperative for the judges to be wise and G-d-fearing, those who physically implement those judgments must also be wise and G-d-fearing as well. The question is that it is understandable that the ones deciding the law - the *shoftim* - should be holy people, beyond corruption and distortion. However, why is it essential that those implementing the laws be scholars of sterling character as well?

The *sefer* Chiddushei HaLev, a book of discourses by Rabbi Henoch Leibowitz, *Rosh Yeshivah* of the Yeshivas Chofetz Chaim, offers a novel approach that addresses this question. He explains that the goal of the lashes was not meant to be a deterrent, or even a punitive measure. The goal was to cause a person to reflect and recognize the gravity of his wrongdoing and ultimately return to the correct path of Torah and righteousness. It is therefore essential for the one delivering the lashes to be wise and pious. The wise and pious man recognizes the goal and the value of the lashes. His lashes will most effectively bring about this goal.

There is an old Jewish phrase: "Words that emanate from the heart, enter the heart." Words alone will not influence others, rather, the sincerity of the one offering those words is what will inspire and influence. In the same vein, the Midrash that describes the qualities of the *shotrim* seems to extend this concept. Even when no words are spoken and lashes are given, the influence of the message is rooted in the intentions and purity of the heart of the one sending the message. In giving the lashes, the *shoter's* intent should be to encourage the sinner to do *teshuvah*. The *shoter* needs to have that in mind when he delivers the lashes to effectively communicate this essential message.

It can be overwhelming to try to influence others. We often struggle with our approach. The lesson from the Midrash is that the effect of our messaging is not based on what we say or how we say it. In fact, we don't even necessarily have to say anything at all. When trying to influence others, the single most important factor is to ensure that we are doing so with a pure heart; a heart that is in line with the messaging we want to give. If we have that, we can rest assured the message will have an effect.

IMPARTIAL JUDGMENT

Rabbi Jeremy Finn

"Judges and officers shall you appoint for yourself in all of your cities..." (16:18)

Rebbe Yaakov Yosef of Polnah was a disciple of the Baal Shem Tov who, together with the Maggid of Mezhriz, took over the leadership of the Chassidic movement after the Baal Shem Tov passed away. He also asks why the *pasuk* says *שופטים ושטרים תתן לך* and answers that *לך* teaches us that we must avoid having two standards - one that we apply to ourselves, and a more critical standard that we use with others. We can't be lenient with ourselves and stringent with others; instead, we need to have the same standard for both.

The same *שופטים ושטרים* - the same exactitude that you display toward other people, *תתן לך* - you also need to develop when dealing with yourself.

Rebbe Simchah Bunim of Peshischa expounded along similar lines.

לך שופטים ושטרים תתן, he suggests, means that before you start judging other people, *לך* - judge yourself, as Chazal say, *קשוט עצמך ואחר כך קשוט אחרים* - ensure that your own house is in order before you proceed to tell others how to run theirs.

Only if someone regularly evaluates his own behavior and sees his own frailties and challenges on one hand, and his strengths and merits on the other, can he fulfill the rest of the *pasuk*: *ושפטו את העם משפט צדק*.

However, if someone sees mainly the faults and weaknesses of others but turns a blind eye to his own shortcomings, he exhibits a "blindness" that now makes it impossible for him to fulfill *ושפטו את העם משפט צדק*.

The prerequisite for judging any person is the ability to be impartial and open to both sides of every story. However, if I have a "blind spot," it impinges on my ability to see things clearly, and therefore, my appraisal of the other is automatically flawed.

Our relationships with others and our relationship with the Creator are dependent on *לך בכל* *שופטים ושטרים תתן*, which all begins with having the same standards for others that we have for ourselves. (Otzar Chaim, p. 94; Parpera'os LaTorah, p. 119)

MEANINGFUL MITZVOS

Rabbi Jeremy Finn

"Judges and officers shall you appoint for yourself in all of your cities..." (16:18)

The word לך this *pasuk* would seem to be superfluous. If the intention is that we have a duty to appoint judges in our cities, then it would have been sufficient to say שופטים ושטרים תתן בכל שעריך. As there are no extra words or letters in the Torah, the inclusion of the word לך needs to be justified.

Rabbi Yosef Zvi Halevi Dunner writes that the necessity to appoint judges to rule on points of law and to establish a police force to enforce those laws would not seem at first glance to be uniquely Jewish. Every society that wishes to function in an orderly and civilized manner needs to have regulations and needs to have a way to ensure adherence to those regulations. However, if the function of law is merely to ensure the smooth running of society and avoid a descent into chaos, then those rules and regulations lack any spiritual content and do not impact the personality of one who abides by them.

The rules and regulations of the Torah, i.e., the *mitzvos*, are different. When the Torah instructs us to perform a specific task or to refrain from engaging in a particular activity, it is not merely to ensure the continuity of civilized order in society.

The *mitzvah* has a direct impact on who we are and affects our *neshamah* - the part of us that is spiritual. This is not only true in respect to the *mitzvos* that are obviously spiritual, such as Shabbos or *tefillah*, but also those that seem to be for the benefit of society, such as the appointment of judges. Every *mitzvah* that we have been commanded elevates us as individuals and strengthens our relationship with Hashem.

This is the meaning of the inclusion of the word לך in our *pasuk*. The Torah is telling us that the appointment of a judicial system is not merely to ensure the smooth operation of society. The appointment of judges, together with all the other *mitzvos*, is לך - for your benefit. It elevates and sanctifies who we are by connecting us with our souls and our Creator. (Mikdash HaLevi, p. 585)

CORRESPONDING JUDGEMENT

Reb Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev

"Judges and officers shall you appoint for yourself in all of your cities... and they shall judge the people with righteous judgment." (16:18)

Daily, the Almighty judges us with great compassion and kindness. But we have to arouse this compassion by conducting ourselves with kindness and by looking at the positive points of our fellow Jews, judging them favorably. By doing so, we awaken this same trait on High. Then, G-d also focuses on a person's merits and on the merits of all the Jewish people.

Thus, by serving G-d here below with kindness, a person awakens and opens the portal of kindness Above, through which blessings rain down on the Jewish people.

This, then, is the deeper meaning of the verse *"You shall set up judges and law enforcement officials for yourself in all your gates."* We, ourselves, through our "gates," determine the judgment - i.e., "set up the judges," - that is rendered Above. The word "gates" alludes to the portals that we make and open by our actions.

Thus, the verse concludes, "They shall judge the people with righteous judgment." This means that each person should accustom himself to judge his fellow with a "righteous judgment" by emphasizing the righteousness and merit of each and every Jew. In this way, a person opens the Heavenly portal, and he himself emerges vindicated from judgment. This is so because "according to the way [מדה, which can also mean 'trait'] a person judges others, he himself is judged" (Megillah 12a).

In other words, the trait [*middah*] that a person exhibits when judging others is the trait that G-d exhibits when He judges the person.

SETTING STANDARDS

Rabbi Moshe Feinstein

"Judges and officers shall you appoint for yourself in all of your cities..." (16:18)

Literally this phrase reads, "Judges and officers shall you give yourself." While the word "give" might be used to describe appointing a public official, the word לך, for you, requires explanation. On the surface, "for them" would have seemed a more appropriate way to convey the idea that Moshe (or his successor) was to "give" judges and officers to the people.

We may say, then, that the Torah phrases the command in this way to teach us that these officials themselves are actually gifts to the people (even those who do not appear in court), for from them one can learn to serve Hashem with character and integrity. Thus if one utilizes them properly, these officials can be, so to speak, a gift each person gives himself, models of how to make Torah and the service of Hashem an integral part of his life.

Really, the word לך, for you, seems entirely superfluous. The verse would have been just as clear had it read simply, "Judges and officers shall you appoint in all your cities." (See Or HaChaim who derives from here the lesson that those responsible for appointing judges are no less subject to their jurisdiction than anyone else.)

We will say, therefore, that apart from its obvious meaning, this verse also teaches us that each individual must act as a judge over himself, constantly probing his actions and compelling himself to follow the Torah's dictates. To this end, he may impose fines upon himself and at times even take an oath upon himself, as the Sages ruled that one may take an oath to fulfill *mitzvos* (cf. Nedarim 8a).

In this sense, the prohibitions against perverting justice and showing favoritism apply to each one of us as much as to any judge. No one should think that just because he is a *talmid chacham* or a person of stature, everything he does is automatically correct; whatever degree of greatness one has achieved, he must still scrutinize his every action just as if he were an ordinary person. Similarly, he must take care not to let the pleasure he has in doing something “bribe” him into thinking that the act is worthwhile or permitted, but if ever he senses that his desires are influencing him, he must follow the Torah’s dictum (v. 20), “righteousness, righteousness shall you pursue.” While the Sages (Sanhedrin 32b) concluded from this verse that one should always seek a court with the most righteous and learned judges, in this situation it also means that one should consult with a *Rav* who can advise him objectively whenever there is any hint of wrong in his ways.

Like a king, a *talmid chacham* is prone to becoming haughty and overbearing and to let himself be lax in certain *mitzvos*. Just as the Torah includes special *mitzvos* to prevent a king from developing any form of arrogance, our verse also warns a *talmid chacham* not to tolerate in himself any laxities or any deviations from the most stringent standards of submission to Hashem.

RESPECT THE RABBI

Kli Chemdah

“Judges and officers shall you appoint for yourself in all of your cities... and they shall judge the people with righteous judgment.” (16:18)

This command is intended for the officials and communal leaders entrusted with the task of engaging rabbis. They must not believe that because they have appointed the rabbi they are exempt from showing the rabbi the respect and obedience due him.

For the rabbi is appointed not only for the congregation or the community but “for yourself,” for every individual, and you must heed his instructions, because only if you will give him the respect due him will he be able to “judge the people with righteous judgment”; only then will the people obey the rabbi and abide by his judgment.

SEEING THE TRUTH

Sefas Emes

“Do not accept bribery, for bribery blinds the eyes of the wise and distorts words of the righteous.” (16:19)

One can infer from a fortiori that personal involvement tends to blind the eyes to wisdom and justice. We know that G-d’s rewards are greater than His punishments. How much more, then, is it true that when we divest ourselves of personal involvement and selfish motivation and endeavor to pursue justice only, our eyes will be opened and enlightened so that we will be able to see and understand the truth.

SELFLESS OBJECTIVITY

Lubavitcher Rebbe

“Do not accept bribery, for bribery blinds the eyes of the wise and distorts words of the righteous.” (16:19)

The problem with bribery is that aside from making us act immorally or irrationally, it distorts our sense of judgment, making us sincerely believe that our warped perception is indeed objective and just. The Torah therefore tells us that bribery “blinds the eyes of the wise,” implying that even after accepting a bribe, the individual remains “wise” - fully capable of logical reasoning - but that he has become blind to objective truth. (Hitva’aduyot 5747, vol. 3, p. 232)

It follows that besides the usual form of bribery - a monetary or other type of gift - there also exists a subtler form of bribery: our simple awareness of ourselves. If we seek to ascertain the truth about anything, we must approach it without any sense of selfhood, for even the slightest degree of self-awareness can cause our perception to be subjective, and therefore incorrect, even if only subtly. In contrast, by cultivating true selflessness, we can be truly objective and see the unobstructed truth in all situations. (Likutei Sichot, vol. 23, p. 95) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisniewsky

COMPLETE DISTORTION

Vilna Gaon

“Do not accept bribery, for bribery blinds the eyes of the wise and distorts words of the righteous.” (16:19)

In *Parshas Shoftim*, it states: כי השחד יעור עיני חכמים - “For the bribe blinds the eyes of the wise,” whereas a slightly different version is found in *Parshas Mishpatim*: כי השחד יעור פקחים. What is the difference between the two?

A “*chacham*” refers to someone who is learned in Torah; a “*peke’ach*” is one who is clever in worldly affairs. We see that accepting a bribe has the effect of distorting both kinds of knowledge.

CLOUDY VISION

Rebbe Nachman

“Do not accept bribery, for bribery blinds the eyes of the wise and distorts words of the righteous.” (16:19)

The clouds that cover a person’s eyes, spiritually obscuring his sight, correspond to the *kelipot* that stop the prayers from ascending. (Tikkuney Zohar #21, p. 50b)

Judgment is in the eyes. That is to say, a person judges in accordance with how he perceives an issue. When judgment is blemished - when the eyes are “clouded” - then one’s vision of G-dliness is also impaired, and he is liable to be distracted by foreign thoughts during prayer. By giving charity, especially before praying, he can rectify judgment and his prayers will flow unhindered. (See Likutey Moharan I, 2:5)

RIGHTEOUS RIGHTEOUSNESS

Reb Moshe Leib Lechner

"Righteousness, righteousness you shall pursue..." (16:20)

There are those who hide their lies with the mantle of truth. They swear by the words "We are righteous, but we have sinned," and defend their falsehoods and quote words from the Torah.

Therefore, the Torah demands "righteousness, righteousness you shall pursue" - that righteousness and truth must be based on righteousness.

PURSUING RIGHTEOUSNESS

Reb Noson of Breslov

"Righteousness, righteousness you shall pursue..." (16:20)

From this verse, we learn that we should pursue the righteous *tzaddik* of the generation. (Sanhedrin 32b)

Just as the Torah is eternal and is available to each and every generation, the Torah is found in the houses of study of the *tzaddikim* of each generation. (Likutey Halakhot II, p. 220a)

The word "righteousness" is repeated in this verse because one who does acts of righteousness and charity not only attains righteousness for himself, but draws rectification for evil, too. (Likutey Halakhot II, p. 196a)

RIGHTEOUSNESS THROUGHOUT

Rabbi Moshe Schochet

"Righteousness, righteousness you shall pursue..." (16:20)

Why does the Torah repeat the word *tzedek* (righteousness)? Wouldn't it be enough to simply say *tzedek tirdof*?

Rav Simcha Bunim of Peshischa (Kol Simcha) provides a beautiful explanation. He suggests that the Torah is teaching us that even when we pursue righteousness, we must do so with righteousness, which is why there is the double language of "*tzedek tzedek tirdof*."

Our society teaches us that the ends justify the means. We are entitled to do what we want to do in the way that we want to do it, as long as it ends okay. Rav Simcha Bunim, based on this *pasuk*, is teaching us otherwise; we must constantly evaluate what we do and how we do it in order to make sure that from beginning to end we are conducting ourselves in a way that is consistent with our Torah values.

Let us use this time to reflect and assess who we want to be and how we want to achieve our goals. With this approach, we will enter Rosh Hashanah with the right mindset.

HELPING OTHERS

Lubavitcher Rebbe

"Righteousness, righteousness you shall pursue..." (16:20)

When we see something amiss in the behavior of other people, we are naturally inclined to help those similar to us, whether in intelligence, shared values, or socio-economic standing. In contrast, when it comes to people higher on these ladders than we are, we tend to imagine that we have nothing to offer them. Conversely, when confronted with people lower on these ladders than we are, we might think that they are beyond help, that it is a waste of time to try to improve their lot.

The Torah therefore tells us to pursue justice twice, in order to emphasize that in addition to helping those similar to us, we must also help those who seem "higher" or "lower" than us - even though it may seem irrelevant or even a waste of time. Each of us possesses unique talents and gifts, and on account of these unique gifts, we all have something to offer everyone. The fact that Divine providence has presented us with the opportunity to help another person is the surest proof that we possess the means to do so effectively. (Hitva'aduyot 5748, vol. 4, p. 246) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisniefsky

TRUE BEAUTY

Rabbi Shlomo Ressler

"You shall not plant for yourself a tree for idol worship, any tree, near the Altar of Hashem, your G-d..." (16:21)

Among the list of rules that will govern the people's living in their own land is the prohibition against planting "an *ashera*, [or] any tree, near the altar" (16:21). While it makes sense that we were prohibited from planting *ashera* trees specifically used for idol worship, why were we restricted from planting any tree?

Rabbi Alexander Zusia Friedman suggests that this prohibition indicates that trees would potentially distract us from the Mizbeach; a holy place should be appreciated for its sacred character and intrinsic beauty, not its appearance or external adornment. Since holy places are extensions of the best of humankind, the hope is that we internalize the message that internal beauty matters most.

JUST PASSING THROUGH

Reb Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev

"And do not erect for yourself a monument, which Hashem, your G-d, detests..." (16:22)

The word "*matzeivah* - monument" is derived from the root meaning "constant and permanent." Do not look at this world as an end unto itself; it should be viewed as a passageway and a preparation for the World to Come.

REMAINING HUMBLE

Kozhnutzer Maggid

"And do not erect for yourself a monument, which Hashem, your G-d, detests." (16:22)

If one regrets his previous behavior and begins to return to serve Hashem properly by praying correctly, studying Torah, and performing *mitzvot* for its own sake, he may become arrogant. The evil inclination begins to burn within him and, because of this attitude, his behavior begins to deteriorate and all his good intentions are spoiled.

Our Sages state that all who become arrogant are considered as though they are idol worshippers. Therefore, the Torah warns us, "You shall not make for yourself any tree near the Altar of Hashem... and you shall not make for yourself a monument." The words "for yourself" are mentioned twice to emphasize that you should not make yourself as though you are a tree or a pillar - "which Hashem, your G-d, detests."

REMAINING OPEN-MINDED

Rabbi Dovid Hoffman

"And do not erect for yourself a monument, which Hashem, your G-d, detests." (16:22)

The Bnei Yissaschar, Rav Tzvi Elimelech Shapira of Dinov zt'l, remarks that the underlying message of the words "*v'lo sakim lecha matzeivah* - do not erect for yourself a monument" is that a person should not be too rigid and inflexible in his ways. The word *matzeivah* comes from the root *matzav*, which means "situation." We can learn from this that one should not be stubborn and inflexible unless every aspect of this situation is taken into account.

In every situation, one needs to weigh the circumstances carefully before reacting, even if the same situation occurs over and over again. This is because each situation is really different, and one minor change in external factors can be a reason for a major change in one's behavior. What may be correct today may be wrong tomorrow, depending on the circumstances.

Rav Y.Y. Jacobson shlit'a, a renowned expert on chinuch matters, once commented: "There is only one way that a parent can 'ruin' his kids; if they [the parents] go to chinuch classes and learn specific methods and stick to them!" A parent will learn a certain approach and if it doesn't work, rather than adapt and change, he will do the same thing over and over again because that's what was taught in the class. Instead of assessing the *matzav*, the situation, properly and realizing what is good for the child, he will become more forceful in his child-rearing methods.

One must not create a *matzeivah* - a *matzav* that is etched in stone. Be open-minded, be flexible, and always continue learning Torah, in order to truly learn and recognize what is correct and proper in every specific situation.

NEVER STOP GROWING

Rabbi Efreim Goldberg

"And do not erect for yourself a monument, which Hashem, your G-d, detests." (16:22)

The Torah forbids erecting a *מצבה*, a monument, for G-d. Rashi explains that as opposed to a *מזבח* (altar), which is built from many different stones piled on top of one another, a *מצבה* consists of only a single stone.

Originally, Rashi explains, in the times of the *avos*, it was perfectly valid to erect a *מצבה* to G-d. However, once the pagans adopted the practice of erecting *מצבות* for their G-ds, such structures became "detestable."

What exactly is the problem with a *מצבה*? After all, the pagans had temples, altars and sacrifices, and we, too, are commanded to build a *Beis HaMikdash* and offer sacrifices on an altar. In fact, the Rambam, in *Moreh Nevuchim*, writes that G-d commanded us to build a *Beis HaMikdash* and offer *korbanos* specifically because *Bnei Yisrael* had grown accustomed to this form of religious worship. Why, then, are *מצבות* considered inappropriate, and in fact something which G-d "detests"?

Rav Moshe Feinstein, in *Derash Moshe*, explains the symbolism of this command. An altar, as mentioned, consists of stones piled on top of one another, whereas a *מצבה* is simply a lone stone. Before *Matan Torah*, Rav Moshe said, all that was necessary was a simple *מצבה*, to be a generally good, decent person, without striving for more. After *Matan Torah*, however, we are expected to serve Hashem in a manner of a *מזבח*, continuously building. We are never to feel that we've accomplished enough, that just one "stone" suffices. Instead, we are to constantly seek to pile on additional stones, to reach for a higher level, to achieve more.

A single-stone monument symbolizes stagnation and complacency, whereas the *מזבח* represents constant growth and progress. After *Matan Torah*, G-d detests complacency, the feeling of, "I've done enough." He wants us to continually move forward and add more "stones" to what we've already accomplished.

We might add that a *מצבה* is placed over a grave to commemorate a departed loved one. After a person leaves this world, it is appropriate to erect a *מצבה*, to reflect upon what the person had accomplished during his lifetime. But while we are still alive, a *מצבה* is detestable. We need to always find more "stones" to add, further accomplishments to pursue.

This might explain the popular custom to place small stones on the *מצבה* when leaving a grave. We express that this individual has already completed his work in this world - but we haven't, and we are committed to building upon the foundations of what the deceased had achieved and had taught us. His work is finished - and we must now continue his work and reach for higher levels. We are to take his *מצבה* and turn it into a *מזבח*, adding more "stones," more achievements and more growth.

PREPARING FOR ETERNITY

Reb Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev

"And do not erect for yourself a monument, which Hashem, your G-d, detests." (16:22)

This can be explained based on what our Sages (Avos 4:16) say, "This world is like an antechamber before the World to Come; prepare yourself in the antechamber so that you may enter the banquet hall." This world is a preparation for the World to Come, and a person who is conscious of this eats and drinks only so that he can be healthy and strong in his Divine service - not for his personal pleasure, G-d forbid (see Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 231).

Now, a person's enjoyment in this world is alluded to by the term "for yourself." As our Sages (Pesachim 68b) say, "Half of the festival day is to spend for yourself," which means for eating and drinking. The mystical meaning of the verse "You shall not set up for yourself" is thus: "You shall not set up" the pleasures of this world - alluded to by the phrase "for yourself" - as "a monument," as a support and a monument for sustaining your physical existence, but as a preparation for the World to Come.

ABILITY TO INSPIRE

Gerrer Rebbe

"And it will be told to you, and you will hear; and you shall investigate well, and behold! it is true..." (17:4)

The verse (Tehillim 119:39) states, "Fulfill Your word to Your servant for the purpose of fearing You." Dovid HaMelech requested from Hashem that he be given the ability to choose the right words to instill the awe of heaven in each Jew.

SOURCE OF SUFFERING

Maggid of Khelm

"If a matter of judgement will be hidden from you, between blood and blood, between verdict and verdict, and between stroke and stroke, matters of controversy within your gates - you shall rise and ascend to the place of Hashem, your G-d, shall choose." (17:8)

If you cannot understand why so many cruel judgments and sufferings have occurred to the Jewish people, "between blood and blood," why Jewish blood is spilled like water; "between verdict and verdict," why new evil laws and decrees are made against Jews each day; "between stroke and stroke," why persecution and oppression grow with each passing day, if you do not understand why the Jews have to suffer so cruelly, then be aware that it is all due to "matters of controversy within your gates." It is because of the continual strife among Jews in cities and towns and the hatred for no just cause that have brought those sufferings upon us.

TURN TO THE TZADDIK

Gerrer Rebbe

"If a matter of judgement will be hidden from you... matters of controversy within your gates - you shall rise and ascend to the place of Hashem, your G-d, shall choose." (17:8)

The Torah is teaching us a very important lesson. The lesson becomes obvious when one wishes to attain levels of holiness in each aspect of life, whether in the study of Torah or in learning to serve Hashem. However, when it is "hidden from you," one finds it difficult to do so without the help of a *Tzaddik* or a wise person. Therefore, one should attach oneself to the *Tzaddik* from whose words we obtain life and holiness that remains forever.

It says in Tehillim (16:3): "For the sake of the holy ones who are on earth and for the mighty, all my desires are fulfilled because of them." Many times as we try to attain holiness and it seems as if we are drowning and need help, the Torah advises that we should "ascend to the place that Hashem, your G-d, shall choose" - go to the *Tzaddik* whom Hashem has chosen. For his every choice is only for Hashem's sake, for the Spirit of Hashem is in him.

FAITH IN THE TZADDIKIM

Rebbe Nachman

"According to the Torah that they will teach you, and on the judgment that they will say to you, you shall do; do not turn from the word that they will tell you right or left." (17:11)

This verse teaches us the importance of having faith in the *tzaddikim* and the Torah sages of each generation. Even if it appears to us that they are wrong, we must still follow their directives.

To the degree that a person does stray from his faith in the *tzaddikim*, he finds it difficult to find a cure for his afflictions. For just as medicines are composed of grasses and herbs, so too, the Torah is composed of letters and words. Each word creates an angel that receives vitality from that word and transmits it to the grasses under its control, so that the grasses heal through the power of the Torah. The *tzaddikim* are the only ones who know how to blend the Torah's teachings correctly so they will bring healing. Thus, if one's faith in the *tzaddikim* is blemished, his ability to attain healing is diminished.

With faith in the *tzaddikim*, one can bring forth beneficent Heavenly judgment. The Zohar teaches (Tikkuney Zohar, Introduction, p. 17a) that beneficent judgment corresponds to the sefirah of Tiferet, the "center pillar" that blends *Chesed* (Kindness) and *Gevurah* (Strength). When one has faith in the *tzaddikim*, he veers neither to the right (*Chesed*) nor the left (*Gevurah*), but walks the middle path of Tiferet, which enables him to attain clear judgment. (See Likutey Moharan I, 61:1)

Alternately, “deviating to the right or the left” refers to the extremes a person can adopt in his spiritual devotions. Rebbe Nachman often counseled his followers to avoid being overly lenient (“left”) or overly stringent (“right”). (See *ibid.*, II, 44; Rabbi Nachman’s Wisdom # 235)

PROPER PERSPECTIVE

Rabbi Moshe Kormornick

“According to the Torah that they will teach you, and on the judgment that they will say to you, you shall do; do not turn from the word that they will tell you right or left.” (17:11)

Commenting on this verse, Rashi says that we must listen to the Rabbis even if they say that right is left and left is right. Based on this Rashi, Rav Yitzchak Berkovits asks the question; if a Rabbi was to actually come to you and tell you that right is left and left is right, shouldn’t you respectfully say to him, “I’m sorry but I think that you may have made a mistake”? As Jews, we are trained to be independent thinkers. We are truth seekers and renowned for our critical eye. If so, how can we understand Rashi’s statement to blindly follow the Rabbis when we know that they are wrong?

The answer, says Rav Berkovits, is simple. Rashi does not say, “if the Rabbis come and tell you that East is West and West is East, you should listen to them!” Rather, he writes “right or left” because right and left are subjective - our perception of them depends on the way which we are facing; for instance, when facing someone else, your right is their left.

Therefore, concludes Rav Berkovits, Rashi is telling us that if the Rabbis tell you that right is left, make sure you turn around because your perspective is all wrong.

FOLLOW THE TZADDIK

Reb Noson of Breslov

“According to the Torah that they will teach you, and on the judgment that they will say to you, you shall do; do not turn from the word that they will tell you right or left.” (17:11)

We must not be too strict (veering to the right) or too lenient (veering to the left). We cannot rely on ourselves, but must rely only upon the *tzaddikim*, who can truly interpret the Torah. (Likutey Halakhot V, p. 225a)

The Torah that Moshe received at Sinai is vast and beyond the comprehension of most people. Only the *tzaddikim* can grasp the Torah in its entirety and transmit it to us.

Therefore, if we want to observe the Torah, we must follow the *tzaddikim*, who can constrict the Torah into measures that we can comprehend (see Likutey Moharan II, 44; Rabbi Nachman’s Wisdom #235). (Likutey Halakhot V, p. 6a)

Specifically, do not deviate from their words. Nor should you veer away from their place - a place that transcends space and is closest to G-d. (Likutey Halakhot I, p. 39a)

SAINTLY REVELATIONS

Maharal

“According to the Torah that they will teach you, and on the judgment that they will say to you, you shall do; do not turn from the word that they will tell you right or left.” (17:11)

The Torah tells us that all the decrees, edicts, customs, and restrictions that our Sages have ordained are based on the will of Hashem. This will is revealed by the Sages who are the embodiment of the Oral Law. It is the Sages who bring the will of Hashem to reality.

PROTECTIVE SPEECH

Rabbi Moshe Kormornick

“When you come to the Land that Hashem, your G-d, gives you, and possess it and settle in it... you shall surely place upon yourself a king whom Hashem, your G-d, shall choose.” (17:14-15)

The Medrash explains that the Jewish People were given three commandments to fulfill upon entering Eretz Yisrael: To destroy the memory of Amalek, to appoint a king, and to build the *Beis HaMikdash*. The Medrash notes that they wiped out Amalek and appointed a king, but they failed to build a *Beis HaMikdash*. Why were they unable to build the *Beis HaMikdash*? Because there were those who spoke *lashon hara*! (See the Medrash on Devarim Rabbah 5:10 for a chronology of Jewish history showing how *lashon hara* was the cause for great destruction, whereas the refusal to speak *lashon hara* was the source of our redemption.)

Not only was *lashon hara* the reason why the *Beis HaMikdash* was not built, but the Chofetz Chaim understands that it is because of *lashon hara* that the *Beis HaMikdash* was ultimately destroyed! (Based on the Gemara in Yoma 9b)

Why is *lashon hara* so destructive? Speaking *lashon hara* brings judgement to the world, and specifically, by speaking *lashon hara*, we are inviting judgement upon ourselves. This is because when someone judges a fellow Jew negatively and speaks disparagingly about him, he himself is judged in the same way; as the Gemara (Sanhedrin 90a) teaches, Hashem treats us measure-for-measure. Therefore, if we act negatively and harshly with other people, that is precisely how Hashem will act towards us.

However, it is also through the principle of measure-for-measure that we can be saved from any negative Heavenly judgement; because, by not speaking *lashon hara*, the Heavenly Court refuses to hear negative testimony against us. The Chofetz Chaim explains this as follows:

In the Heavenly Court, just like in our *Beis Din*, any court case is invalid without two witnesses. Before someone is judged, the witness' testimony is heard. The first witness against a person is always the one who has spoken *lashon hara* about him, and his testimony was already recorded in this world at the time when he spoke against the "defendant." (As the Gemara [Arachin 15b] relates: "Whoever speaks *lashon hara* raises his sins to the Heavens.") The second witness is the prosecuting angel. However, if the "defendant" himself never speaks *lashon hara*, Hashem does not permit the prosecuting angel to give his testimony. Consequently, the prosecutor lacks sufficient witnesses and the case is thrown out of the Heavenly Court. This is all because Hashem acts measure-for-measure with the person who himself never speaks *lashon hara* and does not give negative testimony against his fellow Jew.

Therefore, when we refrain from speaking *lashon hara*, we are not only succeeding in not harming others, but we are arming ourselves with a powerful protective shield.

FROM AMONG THE PEOPLE

Reb Asher Horowitz of Rimanov

"You shall surely place upon yourself a king whom Hashem, your G-d, shall choose; from among your brethren shall you set a king over yourself." (17:15)

Why did the Torah deem it necessary to specify "from among your brethren." Is it not understood that we would not choose a stranger to rule?

The reason for being specific is that we must not choose a ruler who is arrogant and not in touch with his people. Someone who is estranged from his people and lives a daily existence disaffected from the Jewish environment should not rule over his people.

THE PERSONAL KING

Lubavitcher Rebbe

"You shall surely place upon yourself a king whom Hashem, your G-d, shall choose..." (17:15)

Although the Jewish people have not had a king since the destruction of the first Temple and will not have another until Mashiach himself, we are still enjoined to appoint a higher authority over ourselves, both individually and collectively, wherever relevant. The sages therefore say to each one of us: "Provide yourself with a teacher [of Torah]" with whom we should consult on all matters of spiritual life.

We should not delude ourselves into thinking that we can rely on our own "judges and enforcement officers." Nor should we think that there is no one capable of understanding us sufficiently to serve as our "king." The Torah assures us that if we search properly and diligently, we will indeed find the mentors best suited to our spiritual needs. (Likutei Sichot, vol. 24, pp. 104-106) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisnefsky

THE PERSONAL KING

Lubavitcher Rebbe

"You shall surely place upon yourself a king whom Hashem, your G-d, shall choose; from among your brethren shall you set a king over yourself." (17:15)

The Torah uses two terms for "king." The more common one is *melech*, meaning "ruler." The second is *nasi*, which means "someone who is aloof," and is also used for tribal heads.

This is because the king is intended to play two roles. His primary purpose is to be the nation's political leader, ensuring its military, economic, and social security by protecting it from foreign and domestic enemies, ensuring that the law is obeyed and that justice is served.

His secondary purpose is to lead the people spiritually - firstly by his own example of high moral conduct, and secondly by honoring Torah sages, or by teaching the Torah himself, if he is qualified.

Nowadays, we fulfill the Torah's directive to appoint a king by seeking our own, personal authorities, with whom we should consult for spiritual guidance. The two aspects of kingship described above teach us that we should consult our "kings" not only with regard to spiritual matters, but with regard to mundane matters as well, since there is a spiritual dimension to every aspect of life, and even mundane matters have an impact on our spiritual well-being.

By appointing our own personal "kings," we can hasten the advent of Mashiach, who will embody both aspects of kingship - leading the world to its material redemption and teaching us previously unrevealed dimensions of the Torah. - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisnefsky

RULING OVER OURSELVES

Reb Asher Yeshaya of Ropshitz

"You shall surely place upon yourself a king whom Hashem, your G-d, shall choose; from among your brethren shall you set a king over yourself." (17:15)

One should appoint a King "over yourself." One should be able to rule over one's own actions and be able to take responsibility for all that one does.

TURNING TO THE TORAH

Rabbi Avi Wiesenfeld

"And it shall be when he [the king] sits on the throne of his kingdom, he shall write for himself two copies of this Torah in a scroll..." (17:18)

Each and every one of us has found ourselves standing at the threshold of an incredible endeavor, be it entering marriage or beginning a career. At those moments in our lives we tend to become very pensive and ambitious about what resolves to take upon ourselves to make the endeavor a successful one.

We resolve to establish up a home based upon Torah principles. We make plans to ensure that our business becomes the best it can be. But then something happens that seems to cloud our vision, and before we know it all of our passion seems to dissolve. Reality sets in and we become so preoccupied with the demands of day-to-day living that we sometimes forget what we resolved at the beginning.

In this week's *Parshah* we find a very interesting *halachah* which demands an explanation. It says that every king is commanded to own two *Sifrei Torah*. One *Sefer Torah* he is to carry with him wherever he goes, be it to the marketplace or out to fight a war. In fact, he is never to be seen without his *Sefer Torah*. The second *Sefer Torah* is to be locked away in his treasury for safekeeping. What is the purpose of this *mitzvah*? Perhaps we could understand the requirement that the king carry a *Sefer Torah* with him at all times - to remind him of the responsibility Hashem gave him to lead the people in accordance with the guidelines of the Torah, but why does he need to have a second *Sefer Torah* locked away?

The answer is as follows. The *Sefer Torah* that the king walks around with will inevitably begin to fade. The letters may crack, and surely the pages will become yellowed and worn. The act of carrying a *Sefer Torah* with him all the time represents the nature of day-to-day living. Our ideals and principles become worn out as we become inundated with our daily chores. The Torah is telling the king here something remarkable. The Torah is telling the king: Yes, you must carry with you the *Sefer Torah*, but do not rely on that Torah to guide you throughout your life. Rather, remember the second, untouched, pristine *Sefer Torah*. Remember the freshness and passion with which you embarked on your mission, and turn to it when the one you carry becomes faded and mellowed. The Torah in the treasury is not exposed to the winds and wars of life; its characters remain intact. While the cradled Torah becomes cracked and worn, the treasured Torah will remain sharp and flawless. From time to time, we find that the king would go into the treasury and open the beautiful *Sefer Torah* and use it to correct some of the letters in the worn *Sefer Torah*.

This applies to each and every one of our lives. We all carry a personal *Sefer Torah* with us all the time - the Torah ideals and principles we hold dear - from which we take guidance and draw wisdom. However, sometimes we have to go back to our original flawless *Sefer Torah*, the untouched version of our dreams and goals that have innocently become bashed and skewed along the way, and realign ourselves with the resolves we originally set out to achieve.

We are holding now in the month of Elul, a mere few weeks away from the great *Yom ha'Din* of Rosh Hashanah. What an appropriate time to apply the lesson from this week's *Parshah* and look back and honestly rethink where we are holding today in comparison with what we had hoped to accomplish and achieve at the start of last year.

HEIGHTENED HUMILITY

Yalkut Dovid

"And it shall be when he [the king] sits on the throne of his kingdom, he shall write for himself two copies of this Torah in a scroll, from the before the Kohanim, the Levites..." (17:18)

This means that the king must write two scrolls of the Torah. (Rashi)

Why did the king need two Torah scrolls? Because the more exceptional and august one is, in order to remain humble, the more stringently one must take upon oneself the Torah's yoke. A king in Israel must take upon himself a double yoke of the Torah.

It was for the same reason that the king had to remain in a bowed position throughout the prayer service. It was to symbolize that, as king, he had to work harder than others to attain humility.

CONSULTING WITH THE TORAH

Chasam Sofer

"It shall be with him, and he shall read from it all the days of his life..." (17:19)

The king in Israel was to use the Torah to guide him along his life's path. He was to consult the Torah on every issue brought to him, and the views set forth had to be regarded as decisive in all matters of state.

Similarly, according to the Sages (Berachos 3), Dovid HaMelech would consult the Sanhedrin before declaring a war.

STAYING GROUNDED

Rabbi Shlomo Ressler

"It shall be with him, and he shall read from it all the days of his life, so that he will learn to fear Hashem, his G-d, to observe all the words of this Torah... so that his heart does not become haughty..." (17:19-20)

Moshe details the rules that a Jewish king must follow, including the mandate to personally write two Torah scrolls and keep one with him at all times, as a reminder to remain humble and follow G-d's law (17:18-19). Since a prerequisite for becoming king of the Jewish people was a higher level of fear of G-d, why was this directive included?

The Rambam (commentary in Avos) says that the appointment of a person to a high position may create a sense of self-importance. To counteract this effect, the king is directed to possess and read from the Torah daily, in order to ground himself and keep himself focused.

Daily exposure to Torah enhances the lives of not only the kings but also our lives till today; its laws keep us disciplined and add dimension to our lives.

SUMMONING LIFE

Rebbe Nachman

"It shall be with him, and he shall read from it all the days of his life, so that he will learn to fear Hashem, his G-d, to observe all the words of this Torah... so that his heart does not become haughty over his brothers and not turn from the commandment right or left, so that he will prolong years over his kingdom..." (17:19-20)

Rabbi Yochanan said: Authority buries the one who possesses it. For you will not find a prophet whose lifetime did not span the reigns of several kings. (Pesachim 87b)

In order to lengthen his reign, a king must draw life into it. Torah is life, as it is written, "It is your life and the length of your days" (Devarim 30:20), and Torah is the Name of G-d. Just as one summons another person by his name, so too, when we want to summon the Life of life, we must call Him by His Name, as it were.

Therefore, by studying Torah, we summon life and length of days from G-d. This is why Scripture refers to the king's study of Torah as *ve'kara* (וקרא, he should read), for he is issuing a *kriah* (קריאה, call or summons) to life and length of days.

However, a person cannot receive the life force all at once. It must be measured and contracted so that it doesn't overwhelm him. Torah study enables him to receive the light force in appropriate measure. For just as the Torah is divided into books, weekly portions, passages and verses, so too, a man's life is divided into days. Through the "days of his life," he can receive the life force from length of days - from G-d.

INNER HUMILITY

Rabbi Alexander Zusia Friedman

"So that his heart does not become haughty above his brethren..." (17:20)

To preserve discipline and inspire awe, a king must always act sternly ("so that his fear may be upon you"). But this must be on the outside only. In his own heart, the king must not regard himself as superior to his brethren. He must never permit the regal dignity that he must preserve to the outside world penetrate his heart.

RELYING ON HASHEM

Sassover Rebbe

"The fire offerings of Hashem and His inheritance shall they eat." (18:1)

This is exactly what we ask of Hashem in the Grace after Meals when we say: "Please make us not needful, Hashem, our G-d, of the gifts of human hands nor of their loans, but only of Your Hand that is full, open, holy, and generous."

ALL FROM ABOVE

Rabbi Moshe Feinstein

"Hashem is his inheritance..." (18:2)

Onkelos interprets this phrase as referring to the tithes and other gifts designated for the Levites. Nonetheless, it is possible to interpret this passage literally, as we shall explain.

Hashem appointed the Levites as judges over the people and as teachers of Torah, as Moshe said in his final blessings (33:10), "They shall teach Your ordinances to Yaakov and Your Torah to Israel." They were required to attain such a high level of awareness that their inheritance, and indeed their entire lives, were intricately bound up with Torah and *mitzvos*. Thus they were entitled to rely totally upon Hashem to provide amply for their needs without any concern at all for working for their livelihood.

Even though most people must toil for a living and are forbidden to rely on miracles, that is the result of Hashem's curse to humanity following Adam's sin, "by the sweat of your brow shall you eat bread" (Bereishis 3:19). Similarly, the Sages said that man has to work only because his misdeeds have corrupted his sources of livelihood, which would otherwise come directly from Heaven (cf. Kiddushin 82b).

The Levites, because of their role as teachers of Torah, were exempted from this curse and assured that Hashem would provide for their needs. Their example nonetheless contains a lesson for the rest of us: Although we must toil to earn a living, all our inheritance also comes only from Hashem, Who provides directly for all our needs.

While we are required to toil for our livelihood because of His decree - each person in accordance with the specific provisions of the decree that apply to him - we must never forget that everything we have is a gift from Hashem, as the Torah says (8:18), "Then you shall remember Hashem, your G-d, that it was He Who gave you strength to make wealth."

ASSISTING OUR INNER KOHEN

Lubavitcher Rebbe

"The first of your grain, wine, and oil, and the first of the shearing of your flock you shall give to him [the Kohen]." (18:4)

The difference between food and clothing is that the nutrients that we absorb from food nourish each part of our body differently, in accordance with the needs of that particular part, whereas clothing protects and warms the body in general. Food is therefore a metaphor for our intellect and emotions, which operate through specific organs (the brain and the heart), whereas clothing is a metaphor for our will and delight, which influence our bodies as a whole.

Thus, when the Torah tells us to give “the first of your grain, wine, and oil” to the priest, it is allegorically referring to our specific faculties. When it tells us to give him “the first fleece of your sheep,” from which clothing is made, it is referring to our general faculties.

Our inner “priest” is our Divine soul, that part of us that is entirely devoted to spreading holiness in the world and helping us fulfill our Divine mission. By devoting the first and best aspects of our intellect, emotions, will, and delight to our Divine soul, we enable it to assist us in sanctifying ourselves and the world in general. (Likutei Sichot, vol. 2, p. 326) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisnefsky

EVERY GOOD DEED COUNTS

Reb Noson of Breslov

“The first of your grain, wine, and oil, and the first of the shearing of your flock you shall give to him [the Kohen].” (18:4)

The wool of the shearing contains many, many thousands of individual strands and hairs, representing all the good deeds that a person accumulates during his lifetime. With every good deed - even one that seems as inconsequential as a “hair” - one can draw himself to G-d and draw G-d to us.

We give the first shearing to the Kohen, who represents *chesed* (kindness), because conceptually, the Kohen is the one who draws out the good from within each person and illumines the lives of others with the knowledge of their many good deeds. (Likutey Halakhot V, p. 266a)

BEYOND THE CALL OF DUTY

Lubavitcher Rebbe

“If a Levi comes from one of your cities, from all of Israel, where he sojourns, he may come, whenever his soul desires, to the place that Hashem will choose.” (18:6)

We see here that when a priest decided that his relationship with G-d demanded that he perform some aspect of the Temple rites that would otherwise be performed by someone else, G-d gave him a special dispensation to do so, allowing him into the sacred precincts even when it was not technically his turn to be there.

Similarly, there are times when we feel inspired to set our personal concerns aside and perform some aspect of humanity’s collective mission to transform the world into G-d’s home that is seemingly not our job. We learn from this verse that when we are inspired this way, G-d Himself assists us, providing us with all the physical and spiritual means to carry out our resolve. (Hitva’aduyot 5747, vol. 4, pp. 320-322) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisnefsky

WHOLESOME PERFECTION

Rebbe Nachman

“You shall be wholehearted with Hashem, your G-d.” (18:13)

Tamim (simplicity) also means “perfection.” One must always be wholesome, complete and perfect with G-d. In this way, he displays true faith. (See Likutey Moharan I, 18:3)

People tend to think that even as they serve G-d, they are subject to the laws of nature. But this is not necessarily so. When a person perfects his ways, he can be provided with his needs through Divine Providence. (See Likutey Moharan I, 31:9)

People should throw aside all their sophisticated ideas and serve G-d with purity and simplicity. (Rebbe Nachman’s Advice, p. 371)

The essence of your devotions should be with simplicity and straightforwardness, without any cleverness at all.

There is no need to search for especially strict practices to take upon yourself. To think that you should is an illusion; it is simply one of the devices of the Evil One to deter you from serving G-d. Such practices are not part of serving G-d. As our Sages said, “The Torah was not given to the ministering angels” (Kiddushin 54a). It was given to men of flesh and blood. These exaggerated practices can put you off completely.

The greatest wisdom of all is not to be clever. It is simply to be pure and straightforward (see Likutey Moharan II, 44). (Rebbe Nachman’s Advice p. 372)

BEYOND DESTINY

Lubavitcher Rebbe

“You shall be wholehearted with Hashem, your G-d.” (18:13)

When we are connected to G-d, we are not subject to any form of predestination. We should therefore never be concerned with predicting the future, with freeing ourselves from the “spells” of any real or imagined forces, or with dealing with the possible influence of previous incarnations on our lives.

The surest way of ensuring our happiness and success in life is by devoting ourselves wholeheartedly to learning what G-d expects of us (by studying His Torah), by addressing our prayers directly to Him, and by fulfilling His Will. (Igrot Kodesh, vol. 18, p. 205) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisnefsky

ENLISTING HASHEM'S HELP

Lubavitcher Rebbe

"You shall be wholehearted with Hashem, your G-d." (18:13)

In the course of fulfilling our Divine mission in life, we can sometimes wonder if we have properly ascertained what G-d wants of us in a specific situation. After all, we are only human, and we all know only too well how possible it is to misinterpret the meaning of messages.

The answer to this concern is to "be wholehearted with G-d," meaning to trust that G-d does not place us in situations that we are insufficiently equipped to handle. If, from our part, we make sure to enlist G-d's help and rely on it - ignoring whatever internal or external voices there may be that attempt to dissuade us - Divine providence will ensure that we possess all the knowledge and other qualities necessary to navigate life's challenges. (Likutei Sichot, vol. 25, p. 341) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisniewsky

WHOLEHEARTED AFFECTION

Reb Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev

"You shall be wholehearted with Hashem, your G-d." (18:13)

The underlying principle here is as follows: It is the way of G-d to bestow goodness, especially upon the Jewish people, the nation to whom He is as close as a father is to a child, and who are thus called children of the Omnipresent (Devarim 14:1; Avos 3:14). Surely, a father fills the needs and wishes of his son even before his son asks. Certainly, G-d satisfies all the needs of the person who is imbued with such faith.

This, then, is the deeper significance of the phrase "Be wholehearted with G-d" - suggesting that when you wholly attain this level, when you believe that G-d will definitely give you what you lack, then you know that you are "with Hashem, your G-d" - that G-d is definitely with you.

ATTAINING WHOLESOMENESS

Rabbi Shlomo Ressler

"You shall be wholehearted with Hashem, your G-d." (18:13)

After instructing us on the prohibitions against divination and other occult practices, we are instructed to be "wholehearted with the Lord your G-d" (18:13). This sentence doesn't seem to follow the previous sentence so coherently, and it seems to be without any context. While the meaning of the principle itself seems self-evident, how do we achieve this lofty goal?

Though the text does not provide an answer, Rashi explains that being wholehearted with G-d involves conducting oneself with simplicity.

Ohr HaChaim suggests that perhaps the statement itself answers our question: if you are with the Lord your G-d, then you and your life will be whole. Acceptance and faith in the present will lead to internal peace and simplicity of purpose.

PREPARING FOR PROPHECY

Lubavitcher Rebbe

"Hashem, your G-d, will appoint a prophet for you from among you, from your brothers, like me – to him shall you listen." (18:15)

Formal prophecy - G-d's direct communication with human beings - ceased with the final prophets, Zechariah, Chaggai, and Malachi. Nonetheless, G-d has promised us that in the Messianic future, prophecy will not only return but be commonplace: "After this, I will pour out My spirit upon all flesh. Your sons and your daughters will prophesy, your elders will dream dreams; your youths will see visions" (Yael 3:1).

The gift of prophecy was and will be given to those who refine themselves spiritually, particularly through carefully observing the Torah's commandments. Spiritual self-refinement both opens us up to Divine inspiration and enables us to focus on G-d undistractedly. Thus, by enhancing our observance of G-d's commandments and expanding our knowledge of His ways through the study of His Torah, particularly its inner dimension, we can prepare ourselves to receive the gift of prophecy in the Messianic future. (Igrot Kodesh, vol. 20, pp. 73-74) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisniewsky

TEMPORARY AND ULTIMATE REFUGE

Lubavitcher Rebbe

"You shall designate three cities for yourselves..." (19:2)

Allegorically, the relative who seeks to avenge the victim's blood is our own evil inclination. It attempts to "kill us," i.e., to trick us into sinning, thereby causing us to suffer some form of spiritual "death," i.e., a loss of vitality in our spiritual life. The Messianic Redemption will be our ultimate refuge from this pursuer, for the evil inclination will be nullified in the Messianic future. Similarly, the future resumption of the Temple service will afford all who need it the opportunity to complete their atonement.

In the meantime, the study of the Torah is our refuge from our evil inclination, for the holiness of the Torah has the power to neutralize the effect of evil on us. (Likutei Sichot, vol. 34, pp. 121-122) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisniewsky

PREPARING BORDERS

Reb Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev

"Prepare the road for yourself, and divide the border of your land into three parts." (19:3)

The underlying principle here is that no thought can possibly grasp G-d (Tikkuney Zohar, Introduction [17a]). Therefore, He contracts Himself into the attribute of Avraham, to perform kindness (Zohar 1:47b); into the attribute of Yitzchak, to inspire fear of Him (Zohar 3:230a); and into the attribute of Yaakov, to show compassion (Zohar 2:176a). In this way, a border is formed, as it were, which delineates "your land."

This, then, is the deeper significance of the verse "Prepare the road for yourself": Prepare a road for yourselves to relate to G-d - i.e., through emulating His attributes. By doing so, you will "divide the border into three parts," alluding to the three attributes mentioned above. Also, through this, it will become "your land."

MINDFUL COMPASSION

Rabbi Shlomo Ressler

"Innocent blood shall not be shed in the midst of your land that Hashem, your G-d, gives as an inheritance..." (19:10)

Among the many topics discussed in *Parashas Shoftim* is the concept of cities of refuge for those that inadvertently killed another. The Torah says that these cities are a way to avoid spilling the innocent blood of the accidental perpetrator (19:10) by the original victim's avenging family. However, if the Torah was concerned about avoiding innocent blood being spilled, shouldn't the initial accidental death be addressed and avoided? Why is the Torah seemingly only concerned with the accidental killer's fate?

Rabbi David Forman explains that while accidents happen, the way we react to mishaps is more important - as it's something we can control, rather than something that controls us. While the accidental killer didn't do enough to safeguard the friend he killed, our society provides that protection to him as a form of kindness as well as justice.

This helps us in so many ways: it helps the killer learn what it means to be protective of others, it builds a society focused on safeguarding those that need it, and it increases the overall mindfulness of others.

STAY VIGILANT

Ohr HaChaim

"If a man hates his friend, and lies in wait to overcome him..." (19:11)

How can one hate a friend? If he's a friend, then he must love and care for him. The answer is that although the *pasuk* literally refers to a killer who has fled to one of the cities of refuge, it allegorically alludes to the *yetzer hara* which disguises itself as a person's "friend."

One must always be aware that the evil inclination is constantly "lying in wait," watching his every step, hoping to "overcome" him and cause him to sin.

THE TORAH'S TESTIMONY

Reb Noson of Breslov

"One witness shall not stand up against any man for any iniquity or for any sin, regarding any sin that he may commit; by the word of two witnesses or by the word of three witnesses shall a matter be confirmed." (19:15)

The Torah is called "testimony" (cf. Shemos 25:16), and the "two witnesses" refer to "*Na'aseh v'nishma* - We will do and we will hear" (ibid., 24:7), the two words the Jewish people used to accept the Torah.

Na'aseh v'nishma exists at every level of existence. Therefore, a person has an obligation to perform whatever *mitzvah* he is currently doing as best he can at his level (*na'aseh*), while knowing that there is always a higher level to aspire to (*v'nishma*).

Additionally, *na'aseh v'nishma* represents the levels of Torah and prayer, respectively, that exist at each level. Thus, the Torah is rightfully called "testimony," for it has two witnesses, *na'aseh v'nishma*. (Likutey Halakhos VIII, p. 22b)

OPEN TO GREATNESS

Sigheter Rebbe

"And the judges who are in those days..." (19:17)

Rashi comments and says: "Yiftach in his generation was like Shmuel HaNavi in his generation; you must treat him reverently."

The name Yiftach comes from the root of "open up" (פתח). Thus, we learn a tremendous lesson for all time: If a person will strive to "open up" and expand his *avodas Hashem*, no matter what time period he lives in, Hashem looks upon him with honor and respect, as if he were as valuable as the great *tzaddik*, Shmuel HaNavi!

FEARLESS BATTLE

Kozhnitzer Maggid

"When you go out to the battle against your enemy, and you see horse and chariot - a people more numerous than you - you shall not fear them, for Hashem, your G-d, is with you..." (20:1)

Knowing one's modest worth should not stop one from performing the will of Hashem. Therefore, when one goes to do battle against the evil inclination, which has no mercy on the human being and is the true enemy, one should have no fear.

The *pasuk* states that when one sees the "horse and chariot" - the driving force behind the deed and the shell that covers the deed - one should do battle and "you shall not fear, for Hashem, your G-d, is with you."

As the *pasuk* continues, "Hear O Israel, you are coming near to battle." Rashi comments: "Even if there is no merit in you but on the recitation of the *Shema* alone, you are worthy that He should save you." A person should say to himself that as long as the Jewish soul is within him, he should be confident that his repentance will be accepted even if he had committed evil at some time. Hashem's righteousness and mercy will never leave.

POWER OF UNITY

Rabbi Moshe Kormornick

"When you go out to the battle against your enemy, and you see horse and chariot - a people more numerous than you - you shall not fear them, for Hashem, your G-d, is with you..." (20:1)

The Alshich writes that the reason why "you" is written in the singular form even though it is referring to a large number of people is to teach us that in order to succeed, the Jewish People must stand together as a single unit and a united body.

Illustrating this point, Rav Simcha Bunim of Peshischa related a parable about a wealthy man who journeyed with his two strongest horses, rare breeds from different parts of the world, each known for their strength and determination. Yet, after a short while, he found himself stuck in the mud unable to free his carriage. Just then, a poor old man passed by led by two frail horses who were just about managing to pull his carriage along. Yet, when they approached the mud, they skillfully navigated the obstacle and soon enough found themselves on solid ground.

"Tell me," said the wealthy man, "How is that your two scrawny horses are more capable than my strong and exotic horses which are each worth a fortune?"

"Let me ask you," said the old man, "where are your horses from?"

"The gray one is from Turkey, and the black one is from Egypt."

"That explains it," answered the old man. "You see, your horses are capable and magnificent when they are alone, but they don't know how to work with each other. Whereas my horses are brothers. They were raised together, trained together, and ate from the same bowl. When I give one of them a whip because he needs to move quicker, his brother is stirred to work harder so that his brother isn't struck again. Therefore, they're more than capable to navigate any terrain because each one is using his strengths to help the other. Your horses on the other hand are from foreign lands. One doesn't feel the pain of the other. Each one is looking out for himself, and neither of them care about their partner, so they were always destined to get stuck in the mud!"

Our success is only guaranteed if we consider each other as brothers and learn to work together, where if one of us is hit, the other feels his pain and is roused to work harder.

We all have strengths and weaknesses, and like a piece of a jigsaw puzzle, we are only complete when we come together to form a single entity. For, only when we stand united are we capable of successfully navigating any difficulty that stands before us.

POWER OF THOUGHT

Lubavitcher Rebbe

"It shall be that when you draw near to the war, the Kohen shall approach and speak to the people. And he shall say to them, 'Hear, O Israel, today you are coming near to the battle; let your heart not be faint; you must not be afraid, you must not be alarmed, and you must not be terrified of them.'" (20:2-3)

It is natural for people to be afraid on the frontlines of battle. The fact that G-d commanded these warriors not to be afraid teaches us that we have more control over our emotions - even natural, "gut" emotions - than we are accustomed to think we do. By choosing not to dwell on what is frightening, the soldiers can avoid becoming prey to fear.

Moreover, simply realizing that we can control our emotions to such an extent breaks their stranglehold over us.

G-d therefore encourages us to use our minds to influence our emotions proactively, inspiring ourselves to love Him and to fear Him. To be sure, our Divine souls innately love and fear G-d. But due to the overwhelming materiality of our day-to-day lives, these emotions are often submerged under more material loves and fears.

By consciously choosing to think about the reality of G-d's presence in our lives, we manifest our otherwise hidden love and fear of Him, which enables us to live our lives in accordance with our higher values and truest desires. (Sefer HaMa'amarim Melukat, vol. 2, p. 245) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisniefsky

FEAR NO EVIL

Reb Noson of Breslov

"It shall be that when you draw near to the war, the Kohen shall approach and speak to the people. And he shall say to them, 'Hear, O Israel, today you are coming near to the battle; let your heart not be faint; you must not be afraid, you must not be alarmed, and you must not be terrified of them.'" (20:2-3)

The Kohen would tell the people that even if they have only the merit of saying the *Shema*, G-d would save them. (Sotah 42a)

All battles reflect the war between good and evil, between the good inclination and the evil inclination. The *Shema*, our declaration of faith, is the main weapon we need to fight and win this war (Likutey Halakhot IV, p. 229a). One who has faith need not fear any enemies, for he is bound up with G-d, Who transcends all. (ibid., V, p. 92a)

TRUST IN HIS MERCY

Rabbi Aryeh Dachs

“And he shall say to them, ‘Hear, O Israel, today you are coming near to the battle; let your heart not be faint; you must not be afraid, you must not be alarmed, and you must not be terrified of them.’” (20:2-3)

There is a story in Chassidic lore about the famed *tzaddik* and defender of Israel, Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev. A wealthy man approached Rabbi Levi Yitzchak with an irreverent question. He was the wealthiest man in his town, yet he was also the biggest *rasha*. He was entirely unobservant with no regard for G-d, Torah, or *mitzvos*. One day, he mocked Rabbi Levi Yitzchak by saying, “The *Shema* clearly states that those that do not concern themselves with the word of G-d will lack material prosperity.” To further his point, he explained to the Rebbe that he was the biggest *rasha* around, and yet he lacked nothing. Without missing a beat, Rabbi Levi Yitzchak responded, “You actually know what it says in the *Shema*? That means you must read the *Shema*! Do you have any idea of the value in Heaven when a Yid recites the *Shema*?! Of course, it is of no surprise that you are a wealthy man!”

The source for this story might be in *Parashas Shoftim*. When the Jewish People would ready themselves for battle, the appointed Kohen would announce to the men, “*Shema Yisrael* - Hear O Israel.” With this introduction he would encourage the men and tell them that they must not be afraid, for G-d is with them. The Gemara (Sotah 42a) relates that Rabbi Yochanan taught in the name of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai that there is a specific reason the words of *Shema Yisrael* are mentioned in this instance. The implication is that even if the only merit these men had was that of reciting the *Shema* in the morning and evening, they could be confident of their victory in battle.

It is understood that when the Kohen would tell the men not to be afraid, he was referring to their standing with G-d. They should not be afraid that they are not worthy of the miracles necessary to win the wars in Israel. They can and should rely even on the most minimal merits, which they all certainly have.

Rabbi Yerucham Levovitz points out that this interpretation seems to go against everything we know! A Jew must be concerned by his lapses in his observance. Holy people are not satisfied with minimal observance. If they lapse in their observance, they understand that there are consequences, and those consequences should cause fear. If a Jew’s entire observance is merely reciting the *Shema* twice daily, how can he be confident in G-d’s protection? Isn’t he considered a sinner?

To answer, Rabbi Yerucham explains that our fear of sin should seamlessly go hand in hand with our trust in G-d. In truth, our iniquities should cause us to be fearful of the repercussions; that fear, though, must inspire a *bitachon*, trust, in Hashem. Although we are not worthy and have a valid reason to be afraid, we trust that Hashem will help us anyway, even when our observance is minimal at best.

This time of year can be confusing. We focus on our iniquities and the grave predicament in which we find ourselves. We also focus on G-d’s loving-kindness and commitment to us. It seems difficult to reconcile. The message of Rav Yerucham is that fear of sin is a dance. While we recognize the gravity of sin, which causes fear, we, in turn, recognize the love Hashem has for us. This understanding of the love that Hashem has for us helps us to assuage our fears. By trusting in Hashem, we instill a higher sense of connection to Hashem. This, in turn, breeds renewed hope and confidence.

SHIELD OF FAITH

Rabbi Dovid Hoffman

“And he shall say to them, ‘Hear, O Israel, today you are coming near to the battle; let your heart not be faint; you must not be afraid, you must not be alarmed, and you must not be terrified of them.’” (20:2-3)

The Gemara (Sotah 42a) states that from the words uttered by the kohen, “*Shema Yisrael*,” the message is clear that even if one only has the merit of *Krias Shema*, it would be sufficient for him to be saved in battle.

Yet, later, the Torah states that one who is fearful because of his sins should leave. Chazal say that even one who was fearful about what was considered a relatively minor sin should return, because even for a minor sin one might fall in battle. How can we understand this in light of the fact that supposedly the merit of saying *Shema* should protect him?

Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach zt’l quotes the words we say twice daily in Tachanun: “Let not Yisrael be destroyed, those who proclaim ‘*Shema Yisrael*.’” When a Jew - any Jew - proclaims the words “*Shema Yisrael*,” he or she demonstrates that indeed there must be some merit in those special words. It is not only a declaration of the unity of Hashem’s Name and His dominion over *Klal Yisrael*, but the words themselves contain a deep and special meaning. They are the declaration of our pure and unquestioning faith in Hashem; the kind of faith that is ingrained in our hearts and not based on philosophical analysis.

Therefore, the kohen announces the words “*Shema Yisrael*” to the soldiers, to remind them that *emunah* in Hashem is dependent on a straight and simple belief which will merit a soldier’s protection in battle, despite any sins he may have committed.

HAVE NO FEAR, HASHEM IS HERE

Rabbi Shlomo Ressler

“And the kohen shall approach and speak to the people. He will say to them, ‘Hear, Yisrael! You are setting out today to battle against your enemies. You must not let your heart become faint; you must not be afraid, you must not be alarmed, and you must not be terrified of them.’” (20:2-3)

Moshe tells the people how to prepare for the battlefield, admonishing them not to fear the enemy (20:1) and how the Kohen should address the troops, instructing them once again not to fear (20:3). Why would the people need to be reminded multiple times not to fear battle?

Lekach Tov suggests that this battlefield represents our conflict with self-improvement. Even after we've conquered our fears and corrected our actions, we are sometimes betrayed by the notion that we are not ready for more substantial challenges. Resolving to change doesn't mean we'll overcome all future situations, but we are assured that G-d will always be there to help us through our struggles.

BUILDING OF LONGEVITY

Rabbi Dovid Hoffman

"Then the officers shall speak to the people, saying, 'Whichever man has built a new house and did not inaugurate it as a dwelling, let him go and return to his house, lest he die in the war and another man will inaugurate it.'" (20:5)

A soldier in the army of *Klal Yisrael* is not required to fight if he had just finished building his house but had not yet inaugurated it. After all the time and effort he put into its construction, just the thought that he may never have a chance to live in it would depress him (Rashi).

The Plotzker Gaon, Rav Aryeh Leib Tzintz zt'l, writes that each building's foundation is designed to meet the needs of its desired longevity. If the building is temporary, it may not need a foundation at all. For something sturdier, a foundation will stabilize it and help it withstand nature's forces over time. For a structure that will carry a lot of weight and is constructed to last for a very long time, the foundation must be much deeper and in proportion to the building it's supporting.

After the destruction of the first *Beis HaMikdash*, it took seventy years to rebuild the next one. But the second *Beis HaMikdash* lasted only 420 years and was missing many key elements, including the *Aron*. The third *Beis HaMikdash*, however, will remain forever, a permanent structure with all the sacred purity it will contain.

We recite on Tishah B'Av, "With fire it was kindled and with fire You will ultimately build it." The Temple and its foundation that was burned with fire will be rebuilt through the flames of the Spanish inquisition, the scorch of the pogroms, the fires of the concentration camps, and all the blood and tears of *Klal Yisrael* throughout our long and torturous *galus*.

The third and final *Beis HaMikdash* will be of unparalleled proportions in grandeur and longevity. Thus, we need to build a massive foundation to support a building of this magnitude: nearly two thousand years of building. Let us pray that the building is near completion.

SENSITIVITY TOWARDS OTHERS

Lubavitcher Rebbe

"The officers shall then add, speaking to the people and say, 'Is there anyone who is fearful and fainthearted? Let him go and return to his house, so as not to cause the heart of his brothers to melt as his heart.'" (20:8)

When the Torah speaks of the fearful soldier, we are taught that it refers not to a coward, but to someone who fears that his sins will detract from his merits, making him vulnerable in battle. It is for his sake that the Torah sends others home - he who has not yet begun to live in his new house, he who has not yet eaten the fruit of his new vineyard, and he who has not yet married the woman whom he has betrothed. They are sent home so that when seeing a soldier leave the front at the officers' command, others can attribute his departure to one of these exemptions, rather than assuming that their compatriot is a sinner.

We see here that the Torah risks depleting an entire army in order to protect the honor of sinners, teaching us the extent to which we must avoid causing shame to our fellows, regardless of their spiritual level of observance. (Hitva'aduyot 5746, vol. 3, pp. 512-514) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisniefsky

DEFYING GRAVITY

Rabbi Dovid Hoffman

"For, is the tree of the field a man that it should enter the siege before you?" (20:19)

Mashal: We find an interesting phenomenon: Hashem instituted two powerful forces into the nature of the world, both of which are diametrically opposed to one another. On the one hand, there is the concept of gravity, which tells us that everything that goes up must come down. Gravity is a force that pulls everything downward so that nothing can stay up in the air for too long. It is gravity which keeps us anchored to this earth, for without it, we would never be able to maintain our footing.

On the other hand, nature dictates that all plant life, trees, grass, etc. begin growing from down within the soil of the earth. It then rises upwards toward the sky. In seemingly direct contradiction to the physics of gravity, a tree grows straight up into the air and no force of gravity can bring it down.

Nimshal: Rav Simcha HaKohen Kook shlit'a explains that the same applies to human beings, as well. The *pasuk* tells us, "A man is likened to a tree in the field." In what way is a human being similar to an inanimate tree? Just as a tree fights against the natural force of gravity to grow upwards, every Jewish man, woman, and child's purpose in this world is to grow in Torah and *yiras Shamayim*, despite the natural force of the *yetzer hara* to bring him or her down!

FRUITFUL VICTORY

Sforno

"When you besiege a city for many days to wage war against it to seize it, do not destroy its trees by swinging an axe against them, for from it you will eat..." (20:19)

As a rule, when an army realizes that it will not be victorious and will probably have to retreat, it destroys whatever it finds in enemy territory before retreating in order to inflict as much loss as possible on the enemy. But if the army is sure that it will win and conquer the territory, the property there would not be destroyed because it may make use of it at a later time.

To assure the Jews of their ultimate victory, the Torah tells them: "You shall not destroy its trees, for you may eat of them"; you are certain to conquer this land, because G-d Himself has promised it to you and you will be able to eat the fruit of these trees once you have settled in the land. Why, then, should you inflict loss on your own people by destroying the country's vegetation?

THE FRUIT TREE

Lubavitcher Rebbe

"When you besiege a city for many days to wage war against it to seize it, do not destroy its trees by swinging an axe against them, for from it you will eat..." (20:19)

Our emotions are the measure of our maturity. Many people are gifted with superior intelligence or talent, but truly refined emotions are achieved by shedding childlike self-absorption and by contributing to the world. Similarly, fruit-bearing trees provide us with nourishment and delight at their own expense.

In contrast, barren trees merely impress us with their stately presence; they may perhaps offer us shade, but they sacrifice nothing in so doing.

Therefore, when we seek instruction and inspiration, we should turn to people who are not only intelligent and talented, but who consistently utilize their gifts for the world's greater good. And of course, we should emulate the example of the fruit tree ourselves. (Likutei Sichot, vol. 4, pp. 1114-1119) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisniewsky

SAVE THE TREES

Rabbi Shlomo Ressler

"When you besiege a city for many days to wage war against it to seize it, do not destroy its trees by swinging an axe against them, for from it you will eat, and you shall not cut it down; for, is the tree of the field a man that it should enter the siege before you?" (20:19)

Parashas Shoftim details various rules of war, including the unique commandment to preserve fruit trees when besieging a city (20:19). Moshe adds, what some interpret as a rhetorical question, "Is the tree of the field a man?"

This mandate alludes to the fact that trees are powerless to move out of the way, implying that we should be mindful of their limitations and not destroy useful resources simply because they're in our way.

Ibn Ezra explains that Moshe was making a statement and not asking a question. Moshe was stating that "man is a [fruit-bearing] tree of the field." In other words, an opportunity for personal or collective gain does not justify cutting down productive innocent collateral damage.

Moshe is teaching us that it is improper to slight another person for one's own benefit or gain because we are all fruit-bearing members of humanity.

SPROUTING FORTH

Rabbi Elimelech Biderman

"When you besiege a city for many days to wage war against it to seize it, do not destroy its trees by swinging an axe against them, for from it you will eat, and you shall not cut it down; for, is the tree of the field a man that it should enter the siege before you?" (20:19)

Ki ha'adam eitz ha'sadeh (is a tree of the field a man) can also be translated as "man is a tree of the field."

The Beis Avraham taught a very encouraging lesson from this *pasuk*. If you would plant a seed in gold and silver, it would not grow. Only when you plant it in the earth where it is dark and dirty, will you benefit from the what you have planted.

It works the same way with people. You should not despair if it seems that your life is in "the dirt." On the contrary, specifically from your situation, you will develop, grow, and become the best possible version of yourself.

TREE OF THE FIELD

Reb Noson of Breslov

"When you besiege a city for many days to wage war against it to seize it, do not destroy its trees by swinging an axe against them, for from it you will eat, and you shall not cut it down; for, is the tree of the field a man that it should enter the siege before you?" (20:19)

Ki ha'adam eitz ha'sadeh (is a tree of the field a man) can also be translated as "man is a tree of the field."

There are four levels of creation: mineral, vegetable, animal, and human. The level of vegetation binds all creation together, as it draws its nourishment from the land (mineral) and sustains the higher levels of animal and human. Additionally, vegetation embodies many reincarnated souls that await rectification.

Like the Tree of Knowledge, which stands at the level of vegetation at which rectifications can take place, man is the "tree of the field," elevating and rectifying these souls by performing *mitzvot* and subjugating his will to G-d. (Likutey Halachot V, p. 300)

PREVENTING SPIRITUAL CASUALTIES

Lubavitcher Rebbe

"If a corpse will be found on the land that Hashem, your G-d, gives you to possess it, falling in the field, and it is not known who slew him." (21:1)

The purpose of the ritual the Torah prescribes in order to atone for an unwitnessed, unsolved murder is to publicize it, so that it will be easier to locate the murderer, and - more to the point - so that everyone be made aware that the murder occurred. This way, the people will be inspired to do whatever they can to ensure that such a horror not occur again.

Allegorically, the "field" in which the victim is found is an area outside of a settled, civilized city or town - i.e., a realm devoid of spiritual consciousness. Those who are found in this realm are vulnerable to the forces of blind materialism that seek to "murder" them, i.e., to sap the spiritual life from them, leaving them deadened to Divinity.

The Torah therefore teaches us that it is our responsibility to ensure that such a calamity never occur. We do this by embracing and welcoming our "stranded" brethren into our midst, and by spreading Divine consciousness everywhere, transforming even the most deserted "field" into G-d's true home. (Hitva'aduyot 5747, vol. 2, pp. 177-179) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisniewsky

ASSUMING RESPONSIBILITY

Lubavitcher Rebbe

"Your elders and your judges shall go out..." (21:2)

The judges of the nearest city must absolve themselves of guilt in the case of an unsolved murder because they should have given the victim proper escort.

Why, however, must the Sanhedrin, whose seat is in Jerusalem, travel to some far-flung outpost to participate in this ritual? Is it their fault that this crime occurred? The answer is that since the Sanhedrin is responsible for the moral education of the nation, they are quite responsible for such a crime, even if indirectly. (Tanna d'vei Eliyahu)

Allegorically, the slain person is anyone who is a victim of society's materialist outlook, which cuts him off from the Torah, our source of true life. The "Sanhedrin" - i.e., those of us with influence - must assume responsibility for such people. Specifically, the "local authorities" - those of us nearby - must give them the "escort" that will enable them to survive the spiritual threats along their journey in life, meaning that we must teach them the Torah and teach them to perform G-d's commandments.

If, on the other hand, we feel that we ourselves are the "slain" people in this analogy, then, if necessary, we must assume responsibility ourselves for our own spiritual welfare. (Likutei Sichot, vol. 24, pp. 129-131) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisniewsky

LEADING WITH LOVE

Rabbi Moshe Feinstein

"The Kohanim, the offspring of Levi, shall approach, for them has Hashem, your G-d, chosen to minister to Him and to bless with the Name of Hashem, and according to their word shall be every dispute and every plague." (21:5)

This verse lists four distinctions accorded to the priestly caste: serving Hashem, blessing the people with His Name, and adjudicating grievances and blemishes (*tzaraas*). From these qualifications that were required of priests, we can learn a general lesson about the qualities required of any leader of the Jewish people.

No one may be considered a person of stature or a leader unless he is distinguished by his fear of Hashem and the caliber of his service of Hashem. He must also embody great love for Jews, for without this love it is impossible to love Hashem or to lead the people. Indeed, this love is the root of all *mitzvos*; that is why it is mentioned to bless them, which is an expression of love. Still, one's love for the people should not be blind or foolish, for even though he loves them, he must also be capable of resolving their disputes and reproving them for the blemishes he sees in them and directing them onto the straight path. Only such love is true and genuine.

SHOWING CARE

Rabbi Dovid Hoffman

"They will loudly declare, 'Our hands have not spilled this blood, and our eyes did not see.'" (21:7)

When the body of a murder victim is found between two cities, the Elders of the closest city to the victim must perform *eglah arufah*: the neck of a calf is broken as atonement for the murder victim. The Elders then state that they did not kill the man; that they were not aware that the victim left their city without being provided with food or a proper escort.

It is apparent that the Torah is equating negligence in feeding or escorting a guest with murder. But how could the Elders be held responsible for his demise if all they may have neglected was simply escorting him out of town?

Rav Henach Leibowitz zt'l (*Rosh Yeshivah* Chafetz Chaim) provides the following analysis:

Escorting someone as he leaves your home does not physically aid him. Rather, it shows sensitivity toward your guest that you care for his well-being.

With the *mitzvah* of *eglah arufah*, the Torah teaches us that giving moral support and displaying concern for a friend's welfare is as important as feeding him and taking care of his physical requirements. If the Elders had known of the visitor and still would not have escorted him properly, it would have been, literally, a "life and death" issue.

We can now comprehend the awesome responsibility and tremendous power inherent in the *mitzvah* of *chessed* - kindness. If the Elders of the town did not feed the wayfarer, the Torah considers it tantamount to murder. On the other hand, merely walking a block with the traveler would have instilled within him the courage to meet and beat any challenge waiting for him on his way.

Showing warmth and kindness to any Jew, and certainly to our friends and family, is much more than a common decency - it is a responsibility.

ALWAYS WANTED

Rabbi Aryeh Dachs

"They will loudly declare, 'Our hands have not spilled this blood, and our eyes did not see.'" (21:7)

In 2013 I heard an interview on National Public Radio with a man named Mike Williams. Mr. Williams was the inventor of the first intraoral camera, a small camera dentists use to get a better view inside a patient's mouth. He sold his company and made a lot of money. He then made a few bad money management decisions, and subsequently lost it all. He ended up homeless on the streets of Sacramento. There was one part of that interview that struck me. He describes the awful experience of being on the streets and tells the interviewer, "I found out that I was really nothing, and that was very hard for me to grasp, the fact that nobody wanted me around... that I was something nobody wanted to see or could even be involved in. And that crushed me."

When I heard him say that, I realized then how lucky I was to be part of my Jewish community. There are a plethora of Jewish People and Jewish organizations whose mission is to ensure that a Jew knows he is valued. His brethren will help him. A Jew can be assured that there are many people that value him merely because he is a Jew.

At the end of *Parashas Shoftim* we are introduced to the laws of *eglah arufah* - where a Jewish man is found murdered between two cities. The Torah (Devarim 21:7) instructs the elders, the wise Torah scholars, of the closest city to the body, to proclaim at the scene of the murder, "Our hands did not shed this blood, nor did our eyes see [this crime]."

The Mishnah (Sotah 9:6) poses the obvious question: Why must the elders profess their innocence? Why would we ever think they are guilty of this brutal act?

The Mishnah explains that although they did not physically murder the man, they may still be responsible. They must profess that, as the leadership of their town, they did not allow this wayfarer to leave their city unfed, nor did they allow this man to leave their city without being escorted out, *levayah*.

Rabbi Yisrael Lifschitz, known by the name of his commentary on the Mishnah, Tiferes Yisrael, explains how the elders could be responsible for his murder because they did not feed him. A hungry man can be driven to crime, which may cause him to be killed. Or a hungry man is weak; if he was well-fed, perhaps he could have defended himself from his assailants. Professing that their city escorted him out is more difficult to explain. Why would neglecting to escort the man out implicate the elders in his murder?

The Tiferes Yisrael teaches that when we escort someone out, we show that we care. When we part ways with someone we love, we linger. If the wayfarer was not escorted out of the city, his murderer might see him alone and reckon that his victim is a lonely man, without loved ones. He is an easy target; no one would notice or care if he was killed.

The leaders of the city, the elders, must not only care for the physical needs of every wanderer that enters. They are also obligated to make it abundantly clear that the wandering man is loved, and although he is a poor stranger, he is a part of the community.

The *mitzvah* of *levayah* still applies (see *sefer Ahavas Chessed* 3:2). I'd argue that the message behind *levayah* resonates even stronger. We are all obligated to ensure that every Jew we encounter is shown the proper dignity and respect; our communities are responsible to make it abundantly clear that no Jew is unwanted or cast aside.

SHARED RESPONSIBILITY

Rabbi Avi Wiesenfeld

"They will loudly declare, 'Our hands have not spilled this blood, and our eyes did not see. Atone for Your people Israel whom You have redeemed, O Hashem; do not place innocent blood in the midst of you people Israel!' Then the blood shall be atoned for them." (21:8)

At the end of this week's *parshah* we are taught the law of *eglah arufah*, the procedure which is carried out when a dead body is found outside of a city (Devarim 21:1-9).

When the victim of a murder is found between two cities, the elders of the closer city are to "announce and say, 'Our hands did not shed this blood, and our eyes did not see'" - that is, they declare that they are innocent of wrongdoing, and that they never saw the person and knew nothing about him and thus were not responsible for the tragic incident.

The Torah continues (verse 8) with a statement that seems to be out of place: "Atone for Your people, Yisrael, whom You have redeemed." We understand how the elders defend themselves from any guilt for the murder, but why are they to ask for atonement for all of *Klal Yisrael*?

The Maharal, in Gur Aryeh, quotes the well-known statement of Chazal, כל ישראל ערבים זה לזה every member of *Klal Yisrael* is responsible for each other. The Maharal explains that the Torah here is teaching that if there was an act of murder and someone was killed, then accountability rests on every single Jew to introspect and determine whether he bears responsibility. That is why the elders say כפר לעמך ישראל, because all of *Klal Yisrael* is one entity and therefore the entire unit requires atonement.

A delegation of Israeli men came to Bnei Brak to visit the *gadol ha'dor*, Rav Aharon Leif Shteinman zt"l, with the following question: A young man had tragically passed away and they were seeking to do something in his *zechus*. Each man suggested what he thought was appropriate. One said, "We should be *mekabel* Shabbos a few minutes early," while another said, "We shouldn't bring our phones into *shul*."

Rav Shteinman interrupted them and offered the following suggestion: "Perhaps you should think about something completely different. In Eretz Yisrael we live in smaller apartments and the lack of space can sometimes be difficult on the family. The next time you get a knock on the door from your neighbor asking for your permission to make an extension to his apartment, even though it may be inconvenient for you and cause a big mess, a lot of noise, or block your view, just say yes. Agree to allow your neighbors to do whatever they need, because you have no idea how much difference it will make to their lives." That is the way a *gadol* thinks; he understands and lives with the responsibility we each have for one another.

This is what the Maharal is teaching us in this week's *Parshah*, which coincides with the arrival of the month of Elul. With only four weeks left until Rosh Hashanah, what more can we do to ensure a meritorious judgement? Perhaps we can undertake to think about every single one of the *Ribono Shel Olam's* children. When Hashem sees how we are thinking of others, He will think of us and we will be *zocheh* to a favorable judgement.

HAFTORAH

COMFORTED BY HASHEM HIMSELF

Reb Meir Shapiro of Lublin

"I, even I, am He Who comforts you..." (Yeshayahu 51:12)

The Yalkut mentions a statement by the Sages that, in the end of days, G-d will ask the world nations to comfort the people of Israel. But then the Jews will protest, saying: "After all our years of pain and exile that we have suffered at their hands would You really want the nations of the world to comfort us? We want consolation from You, not from nations who have caused our sufferings."

G-d will reply: "If you will truly refuse to be comforted by the nations of the world but will turn to Me instead, I will comfort you Myself."

This Sages' saying is based on the sequence of the first four "*Haftaros* of Comfort" from Yeshayahu, by the text of the opening words of each: The *haftorah* for Va'eschanan begins with the words: "Comfort, comfort, My people." The *haftorah* for Eikev starts with the words: "But Zion says: 'Hashem has forsaken me, and G-d has forgotten me.'" The *haftorah* for Re'eh opens with: "O you afflicted, tossed with tempest and not comforted." Finally, the *haftorah* for Shoftim opens with the words: "I, even I, am He Who comforts you."

This is a logical arrangement: G-d first turns to the world nations, saying: "Comfort, comfort, My people." Then Zion will say: G-d has forsaken and forgotten me? "Why, O Hashem, have You forsaken and forgotten me," and allowed the world nations to comfort us? Then G-d will reply: "O you afflicted, tossed with tempest and not comforted," if you will refuse to be comforted by the world nations but want comfort only from Me, then let it be so. "I, even I, am He Who comforts you."

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