



Parashat Shoftim: The Bribery We All Take

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Dear Friends,

Parashat Shoftim is one of the greatest and most moral of the parashot in the Torah. It may be the first time in history that the power of the leaders - all branches of power - is being limited by a clear demand to be loyal to and bound by a higher jurisdiction.

"Judges and officers shall you make for yourself in all your gates, which the LORD your God gives you, tribe by tribe; and they shall judge the people with righteous judgment. You shall not wrest judgment; you shall not favor respected persons; neither shall you take a gift [bribery]; for a gift blinds the eyes of the wise, and perverts the words of the righteous. Justice, justice shall you follow, that you may live, and inherit the land which the LORD your God gives you." (D'varim 16:18-20)

How fitting is this Parasha to open the month of Elul, month of retrospection and T'shuva.

I would like to focus this year on bribery, as it presents itself in our parasha.

This is what Wikipedia has to say about bribery:

Bribery is the act of giving money, goods or other forms of recompense to a recipient, in exchange for an alteration of their behavior (to the benefit/interest of the giver) that the recipient would otherwise not alter.

Parashat Shoftim - similar to Parashat Mishpatim in Sh'mot - recognizes that bribery is not just offering benefits, such as money, political appointments, discounts, sexual services, etc. Bribery is anything that might bias the recipient's mind. *"A gift blinds the eyes of the wise"*. Even treating a high ranking person in court differently than one would treat the simple person is a form of bribery.

We are all biased most of the time. There are very few people who are truly unbiased in the tasks they fulfill, even in parenting. We are all familiar with teachers who have a bias towards certain students. We all know people who have a great knack for saying just the "right" thing in the "right" tone of voice, in order to get their way. Flattery is just one example. Flattery "done right" works miracles... it gives us a sense of affirmation and approval of who we so badly want to be.

As a teenager I loved the book "The Fountainhead", by Ayn Rand. It was very popular at the time, and there was a waiting list for it at the library.

We admired the hero of the story, Howard Roark, the daring architect. We loved him because he represented the ultimate unbribable, unbiased character. He could not be swayed by anything or anyone. We all wanted to be like him. His character struck a chord within us because there is a similar quality deep inside each and every one of us (without which no identification is possible. "It takes one to know one", as the saying goes). The Roark within shows itself when we have moments of clear vision of our path, of Divinity manifesting itself through us. I find it amusing that Ayn Rand, the self-defined Jewish atheist and anti-religious writer, could write such a religious book.

But let's be honest. Despite our admiration of Roark, we are all much more similar to the other architect in the book, Peter Keating, who was fashion-bound, unoriginal, and hypocritical. Like us, Keating did not have the stubborn commitment, loyalty and zeal to follow and stand by his own truth. Like us, he easily fell prey to his weaknesses. And, just like us, deep inside, even he idolized Roark, which is why he was so jealous of him.

Rabbi Shimshon Raphael Hirsch explains the word bribery as an act that deadens the spiritual and moral strength of the recipient, the strength which is needed for clear thought and objectivity. Bribery blurs the vision specifically of those who are normally very perceptive. It weakens the judge's ability to pass unwavering judgment based on truth.

From Roark and Keating, back to us. We may think that the parasha is addressing all future kings, judges, and people of power. But while the Torah is certainly concerned with the moral health of the leaders of Israel, I would argue that it never really deals with the "other" - the king or the Supreme Court judges, or our president/prime minister, for that matter! The parasha begins with the words "*Judges and officers shall **you** make for **yourself** in all **your** gates...*" It calls upon each one and one of us to take full responsibility for our **own** affairs. Using Parashat Shoftim to judge and condemn the leadership and public officials for their shortcomings robs us of the life affirming lessons the Torah is trying to teach us. We all have blurry vision; we all view reality with an eye towards pleasing others. We are all affected by fashion, the media, social pressure, conditioning (aka "education"), etc.

Taking personal responsibility is actually true for anything we read. Next time a new scandal hits the news, instead of rolling your eyes with disgust, use the scandal to do the only thing you have power over: look inwards and do your own soul searching. Condemnation of another only serves to help us feel better about ourselves, but all responsibility is lost.

It doesn't absolve us from the responsibility to be politically involved, but true change will come when we examine the king, the judge, and the powers that be within our own internal operating system.

It is the month of Elul, the month of introspection. Parashat Shoftim invites us to observe our thought patterns, and notice the places in which we ourselves are biased; where we tend to blur our deep, personal truth; where we are bribed by our human need to fit in, to find favor, and to feel more socially comfortable.

I, too, will take these words to heart and try to clean up my own inner world from all the bribes that have hijacked my thinking this year, and return - i.e., do T'shuva - to my own subjective grasp of Divine truth, given my limited human understanding.

Shabbat Shalom,
Elisha