

Parashat Shoftim: The Wonderful Paradox of Life
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Dear Friends,

My son Yehonatan and I just came out of the movie “The Incredibles II”. The heroes of the film have superpowers, and they take care of maintaining order in the world and banishing evil. What a wonderful movie!

Parashat Shoftim opens with the following command: **“You shall appoint for yourselves judges and police (governing) forces at all your gates, in all the dwelling places that the LORD your God is giving you, and they shall judge the people with due justice.”** (D’varim 16: 18)

To demand that a society be based on the values of justice seems like an obvious and natural idea, doesn’t it?

Well, obvious - yes; natural - not really.

Nature has no system of justice, morality, or judgment. Passing laws and sending law enforcers to maintain them is a human thing. It stems from man’s greatest fear: chaos. Hence, Creation begins with “Tohu Vavohu”, and it does so daily, according to our prayer book. Animals are driven by survival and reproductive instincts, humans alone live with constant existential anxiety in addition to these.

For a few minutes at the end of the movie I still felt this powerful protective power of the Incredibles, but the bright sun outside brought my consciousness right back to the superheroes-less reality.

Bummer, we’re on our own!

In their absence, is there another solution for our human existential anxiety? For the sense of deficiency? For the fear of chaos that threatens our existence?

One of my favorite verses in the Torah appears in this week’s parasha: **“Be whole with the LORD your God.”** (D’varim 10: 12) This verse may bring a new light to the dark tunnel of existence. The Hebrew word for “whole” is “tamim”, which, in modern Hebrew, means innocent. The Sefaria translation, which we often use in these drashot, uses the word “wholehearted” instead of “whole”, which hints at the meaning I wish to suggest this week. Being wholehearted with God is a state of deep consciousness of there being an order of some kind, even if we cannot see or understand it. This consciousness may help dissolve our constant fear of chaos, and therefore the sense of insufficient justice and law.

Another way to understand the word “tamim” or “whole” is to look at its antonyms. Two possibilities are “deficient” and “defective”. The latter sounds judgmental, and

therefore not useful for us here, while the former simply indicates a plain and reasonable reality.

The idea of deficiency is described in the writings of several modern Jewish philosophers such as Rabbi Nachman, Rav Kook, Harav Ashlag, and others. They view deficiency as the key to the natural functioning of the universe! Deficiency - whether natural or psychological - puts the creative processes into motion. That's how atoms unite and molecules are created. But even beyond the natural process, in the human psyche something within us always desires more, and that desire propels humanity to its next stage.

While a healthy sense of immediate deficiency exists in nature, only humans can imagine a potential **future** deficiency, which lies at the core of our existential anxiety. Ironically, nature is constantly at one with God, while we - humans - are not, so we rely on rules and enforcement agencies to give us the sense that we are protected from whatever tomorrow may bring. While I may be okay now, I may not be in thirty years, and that's when the societal laws and values will be there to provide protection: family values, well planned and enforced pension policies, solid (and expensive) health care, welfare benefits, police protection, etc.

However, even with all of these guarantees in place, we will continue to be anxious about possible threats in the future. It is not possible to banish this angst entirely, but it is possible to ease it. That is where **“be whole(hearted) with the LORD your God”** comes in.

This is not a behavioral command. There is nothing that one needs to do. Rather, it asks us to adopt a change of consciousness. This elevated consciousness contains a wonderful paradox. ***The underlying assumption is that we are all absolutely whole and perfect. We lack nothing. Yet, we are not aware that this is so, for we feel the constant sense of deficiency. “Be wholehearted” suggests that our perfection includes our sense of imperfection. Deficiency is a blessing, which motivates us to create and grow. “Deficiency” is not the opposite of “whole”, then, but actually part of it! It is part of our perfect selves.***

This paradox is liberating! Our wholeness, our oneness with the Creator and with Creation needs to be comprehended, as does our innate sense of deficiency which is part of being fully alive. But this notion of wholeness along with the sense of deficiency also needs to be experienced, because sometimes it is the best way to grasp what our minds cannot.

Then we will no longer need superheroes! We will honor our perfect deficiency, and be wholehearted!

Shabbat Shalom,

Elisha