

## **Parashat Shoftim: From Where Will My Help Come?**

Parashat Shoftim is the parasha of justice and social ethics:

**“You shall appoint magistrates and offices for your tribes, in all the settlements that the LORD your God is giving you, and they shall govern the people with due justice. You shall not judge unfairly: you shall show no partiality; you shall not take bribes, for bribes blind the eyes of the discerning and upset the plea of the just. Justice, justice shall you pursue, that you may thrive and occupy the land that the LORD your God is giving you.”**

(D'varim 16:18-20)

No other organism in the world, other than humans, requires magistrates and officers. No other creature knows how to give or take bribes.

So what went wrong? How did human beings - the pinnacle of creation and the glory of evolution - become the most evil, cruel, destructive, and dangerous species for the existence of the world, more than any other on the planet?

The answer does not lie in our technological abilities. While it is true that a lion will kill only one zebra every time he is hungry, and humans have the technological capability to destroy the entire world by pressing a single button, regardless of whether or not we are hungry, this is not the reason humans are dangerous.

In my humble opinion, the reason is that only human beings are never satisfied, never satiated.

A satiated lion will go to sleep and not hurt a fly. A satiated human being will never stop hunting. He will always want more, and more, and more. A judge or a politician does not take bribes because he is hungry, but because, just like any other human being, he simply does not know when enough is enough.

Animals behave according to clear natural laws. Even though these laws sometimes horrify us with their cruelty, they are nothing compared to the cruelty human beings are capable of.

Humans are driven by a false understanding that is, in turn, driven by existential fear. This false misunderstanding is the main reason for human misery, and for the constant hunger that sends us out of our minds and our equilibrium over and over again, requiring magistrates and officials to set us limits.

This misunderstanding is one which our parents instilled in us from birth. It is not their fault. Their parents did the same for them, and we will pass it on to our children, and they to theirs, forever, or until a new understanding emerges.

The misunderstanding is that we are certain that happiness, joy, success, and security are found outside of ourselves - a good income, health, a profession we can be proud of, and a loving life-partner, for a start.

But this is simply not true.

This does not mean that one should not strive for livelihood, profession, and love. These are all worthy goals. Money in the bank brings a certain calm and allows us to do many wonderful things. Intimacy is a very significant part of our joy in life and our sense of security. A fitting profession can give us a lot of satisfaction and inspiration. And, of course, good health raises the quality of our life! But none of these are the *source* of our happiness; nor are they the *source* of our sense of security.

Our parasha contains the laws of the Israelite king, the Priest and the Levite. The future king must be of the people, and **“He shall not hoard for himself many horses...and he shall not have many wives... nor shall he amass silver and gold to excess.”** (D’varim 17:16-17). The Priest and the Levite shall not own land.

One who keeps many horses, women, and much gold and silver is not truly a king. He is a slave - enslaved to the human hunger that knows no gratification. That was the downfall of King Solomon - the wisest among men.

As long as we think that the source of happiness and security lies outside of ourselves we will never be satisfied! We will always want more money, more “things”, more stimulation. We will never have enough.

Later on in D’varim it is stated very clearly: **“It is not in the heavens...Neither is it beyond the sea...No, it is very close to you... it is in your heart, to observe it.”** (D’varim 30:12-14)

As long as this mistaken notion controls us, we will need magistrates and officers at our gates in order to restrict our desire and our hunger.

My favorite sentence in the entire Torah - one which decorates my rabbinic ordination certificate - appears in this week's parasha: "**You shall be whole with the LORD your God.**" (D'varim 18:13)

For me the meaning of this verse is that we are, in essence, whole. We are not broken, not lacking, and certainly not dysfunctional. Because we are whole, everything we long for already exists within us from birth (and perhaps even long before that, as you will understand shortly).

Clean air, nutritious food, good water, the right amount of sunshine, and a safe and comfortable roof over our heads are all necessary for the existence of our body. Without them we would die. Here, then, lies the unfortunate confusion. Because we must have these elements in order to survive, we mistakenly believe that they are also the source of our happiness and security.

While they are necessary, they are not the source!

The source of happiness, security, and joy is found only within. But when I say "within", I am not referring to a specific physical place in our bodies - such as our hearts. Rather, it is to be found within the essence of our Being. This human essence, according to Torah, is Divine, eternal, infinite, and not only is it very close to us, but - because it is our very essence - it could not be closer. Hence, it did not start when we were born, and it will not die when our body dies. It is far more essential, more "within" than our physical body.

Since our essence is Divine, to be "**whole with the LORD your God**" means to be whole with the Divine essence which constitutes us.

We were not taught this at school, and this understanding is not transmitted from one generation to the next. Harav Kook explained it in this way (loosely translated): *"Educated teachers look at the external. They, too, distract the focus from the essential, Divine "I", thus adding fuel to the fire. They give vinegar to the thirsty, and cram minds and hearts with everything external to them, so that the "I" is slowly forgotten. And because there is no "I" there is no "him", and there is certainly no "you"... We must seek our Divine "I", we must seek ourselves and we shall find..."* ('Eight Chapters', Chapter 3:24)

Human beings are ill. Society is ill. Even our judges and officers are ill. And all because of a tragic misunderstanding, a mistake which has accompanied us from the dawn of existence. Like the doctors who refused to wash their hands and in

doing so passed disease from dying people in one ward, to women giving birth in another, so human beings transmit this mistake from generation to generation.

Poor us - we genuinely thought that happiness and security come from “over there”: that a profession we may be proud of, a certain income, a better husband/wife, or perhaps the perfect diet, strength exercises, health food - preferably organic - and lots of vitamins will bring us happiness. And if all fails (and it will), there is always alcohol, drugs, and medication.

What we have here is an invitation to a radical shift of consciousness. A “game changer.” This shift can entirely change the face of humanity and of society. While the shift begins with an intellectual understanding, it must be internalized and experienced in order for it to take effect. Otherwise, all we are left with is pointless spiritual chatter.

The month of Elul provides a wonderful opportunity to do an in-depth survey of our unconscious “crutches”. “From where will my help (joy, security) come?” (Psalms 121)

We can begin with the deep understanding that we are already whole. Always. And that this wholeness contains all of the answers we are searching for, all of the strength, security, and happiness we seek.

Then we will discover that money, profession, partner, and all the rest, are not the source of joy, but are a wonderful - albeit external - expression of the complete wholeness that we already are, within.

Shabbat Shalom,

Elisha