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ISSUE #36 · AUGUST 15, 2026 · ב' אלול תשפ"ו

PARSHAS SHOFTIM

פרשת שופטים



Shade Costs Nothing!



BY RABBI AVROHOM JACKS

A forest contains two types of trees. During a war, the Torah permits the Jewish army to destroy one type of tree, but commands us to protect the other.

The first kind of tree bears no fruit. These trees are planted for their timber. They include the impressive oaks, and cedars, and redwoods. They grow tall and stately. They blanket the earth with their shade all summer. But shade is a mere byproduct of being big, an automatic result of simply standing in the sun. To cast shade costs the tree nothing.

The second type of tree is the fruit tree. It may not seem as impressive as the non-fruit trees. It may be bent from the weight it carries. But every apple it produces is built from the tree's own reserves. The water and sugar are pulled from inside the tree itself. It hands this fruit, a part of itself, to a stranger who eats it and walks on. It demands nothing in the way of thanks.

At the end of this week's parsha, Moses lays out the laws of war. When you lay siege to an enemy city, you may surround it. You may starve it out. You may flatten it. But you must not destroy its fruit trees. However, when it comes to the barren trees, the Torah tells the army to go ahead and cut them down. All that height and all that stately shade, and the tree ends up as lumber.

As with trees, so too with people. Brilliant and talented people are everywhere, and the world idolizes them. These dazzling people are handed the microphone. They become the influencers who attract millions of adoring fans.

However, the Torah asks something different from each of us. It cares nothing for the size of your audience or how gifted you may seem. It cares whether something has come from you, even at your own expense, and fed somebody else.

The shade tree may survive the summer untouched, but the fruit tree survives the war.

The world may tell you to cut down whatever is costing you. G-d stopped an army mid-siege to provide the exact opposite message. So give one person this week something whose absence you will actually feel. Remember, the shade tree may survive the summer untouched, but the fruit tree survives the war.

Gematria on the Parshah: The Qualities of the King of Israel



BY MOSHE HERSKOVITS

In Parshat Shoftim, Bnei Yisrael are warned that when they enter Eretz Yisrael they will wrongly ask for a king like all the nations of the world. The Torah gives several prohibitions for a king, such as not amassing too many horses. What does it actually take to be a successful king? The Tzaddikim reveal three facets: his heart, his humility, and his emunah.

THE HEART OF THE LEADER

The Torah hints at what makes a great leader. The first is that the king cannot be a foreigner, he must be from among your brothers. On the simple level this means he must be Jewish, but on a deeper level, a king of Israel must see himself as a brother to his subjects. His role cannot be for himself but for the betterment of Am Yisrael.

When the Kotzker Rebbe passed away, his chassidim were left broken and searching for a Rebbe. They turned to Rav Simcha Bunim of Peshischa, but he refused. Only when he realized that he already knew exactly what every person who walked through his door needed for their soul, and how to guide them, did he change his mind.

The Chiddushei HaRim says Hashem gifted him this because Rav Bunim felt their pain as his own. This, Rebbe Nachman teaches, is

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what it means for a king to be the heart of the people: he must carry his people so deeply that their pain and joy becomes his own.

This is the same quality demanded of a Kohen Gadol. We know the Kohen Gadol wore the choshen, the breastplate, with all the names of Israel resting upon his heart. This was to internalize that all of his greatness was given for one purpose: to serve the needs of Israel. The same applies to a king. The ultimate king, משיח (Mashiach), is gematria 358, the same as חשן (breastplate), alluding to this idea.

THE HUMILITY OF A LEADER

In the Talmud, Rabbi Yehoshua Ben Levi reveals something remarkable: a King of Israel must bow down for the entire Shemoneh Esrei, start to finish. This is to internalize the humility necessary to lead. Gematria alludes to this idea: the gematria of מלך ישראל (King of Israel) is 631, the same as Avraham's expression of humility, אפר+עפר (dust+ashes). This is why a king of Israel cannot have too much gold and silver or too many horses, to make sure he remembers he is there in service to the nation. This is what true humility is. The arrogant person sees himself as the center of the world, while the humble one sees the will of Hashem and the needs of Israel as the center.

THE EMUNAH OF THE LEADER

The final facet of a successful king is emunah in Hashem. We know the most famous phrase of emunah, from Nachum Ish Gam Zu, was גם זו לטובה (this too is for the best), which is exactly the gematria of 108, the same as מנהיג (leader). A Jewish leader must see Hashem behind every aspect of life, his own and the nation's. This is why David HaMelech is said to have had yafei einayim, beautiful eyes: he saw that everything was in Hashem's control. As the saying goes, either you fear man, or you fear God. The King of Israel must fear only the Creator if he is to succeed as a leader.

LESSON FOR OUR LIVES

Rebbe Nachman says every person is given leadership in different aspects of life. To succeed as leaders, let us ask the question Rav Simcha Bunim asked: what are the needs of the people around me? What is Hashem's will for them? And let us always ask, with the role of leadership Hashem has given me, how can I use it to better the lives of all those around me?

For more, check out the Gematria Torah channel on YouTube!

The Judge Inside You



BY REB ADAM KLASNER

Parshas Shoftim begins with a command:

"Shoftim v'shotrim titen lecha."

You shall appoint judges and officers for yourself.

There is something interesting about the wording.

The Torah could have simply commanded us to establish courts and judges. Instead, it says "titen lecha", appoint them for yourself.

Maybe because before we become judges of everyone around us, we need to learn how to judge what is happening inside ourselves.

And most of us are very good judges.

We notice what our spouse did wrong.

We notice how our children should behave differently.

We notice the person in shul who bothers us.

We notice the employee who disappointed us.

We notice exactly where everyone else needs to grow.

But when something happens inside of us, we often don't investigate with the same curiosity.

Someone says something and suddenly we're angry.

Someone doesn't respond and suddenly we feel rejected.

Our child doesn't listen and something inside us explodes.

A business deal falls apart and suddenly we're filled with fear.

Usually, our first instinct is to look outward.

They made me angry.

They disrespected me.

They don't appreciate me.

They need to change.

Shoftim invites us to build a courtroom somewhere else first.

Inside.

Before deciding what the other person did wrong, become curious about what just happened within you.

What am I feeling?

What story am I telling myself?

Why did this affect me so deeply?

What am I afraid of?

What am I actually needing right now?

This doesn't mean the other person did nothing wrong.

Emotional ownership does not mean removing accountability from other people.

It means refusing to abandon responsibility for yourself.

And there is an enormous difference.

When I believe you are responsible for what is happening inside me, my only path to peace is changing you.

But when I become curious about what your behavior awakened inside me, suddenly I have somewhere to go.

I can work with it.

I can feel it.

I can understand it.

I can bring it to Hashem.

And then, if a boundary needs to be set or a difficult conversation needs to happen, I can have it from clarity rather than from reaction.

Maybe this is also why the Torah continues:

"Tzedek, tzedek tirdof."

Justice, justice you shall pursue.

Truth requires us to look in both directions.

At what happened outside of me and at what happened inside of me.

At their responsibility and at mine.

That's a much harder way to live.

But it's also where freedom begins.

This week, when someone triggers you, before building a case against them, try asking yourself:

What is this moment revealing about me?

You may discover that the person standing in front of you isn't only the problem.

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They may also be the mirror Hashem is using to show you where your next piece of growth is waiting.

The Heart of the Matter



BY RABBI NACHUM AARON KUTNOWSKI

In Parshas Shoftim, the Torah issues three prohibitions to Jewish kings - against accumulating horses, wives, and gold (Devarim 17:16-17). The Sefer HaChinuch counts these as three separate Mitzvos (499, 501, 502).

At first glance, they appear to share a common concern. The Chinuch explains that horses and gold are instruments of pride - beautiful, impressive, and dangerous precisely because they cause their owners to become haughty. The Torah makes this explicit: "So that his heart will not become haughty over his brothers" (Devarim 17:20). Historically, royal marriages functioned similarly - each wife representing another alliance sealed, another nation brought into the king's orbit, another display of his reach and influence.

One might reasonably conclude that all three prohibitions share the same root: curbing self-aggrandizement. But the Sefer HaChinuch does not take this position. When it comes to wives, he offers an entirely different reason: "The reason for the commandment is elucidated in the verse itself - for wives sway the hearts of their husbands, seducing them to do what is not fitting" (Sefer HaChinuch, Mitzvah 501).

With horses and gold, the danger is external - the display of power corrupts. With wives, the danger is internal - the influence on the heart corrupts. These are not the same prohibition wearing different clothes. They address two entirely different vulnerabilities in the person of a king.

And the Torah captures this distinction in a single phrase. The warning regarding wives reads: וְלֹא יָסוּר לְבָבוֹ - "and his heart shall not be turned astray" (Devarim 17:17). The heart, not the treasury, is what is at stake.

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This, perhaps, points toward a deeper truth about what a true Eishes Chayil represents. Mishlei describes her with the words: בָּטַח בָּהּ לֵב בַּעְלָהּ - "the heart of her husband trusts in her" (Mishlei 31:11). The very same heart that the Torah warns must not be turned astray can, through a true partner, be safely entrusted. What the Torah identifies as the king's greatest vulnerability becomes, in the right hands, his greatest strength.

The heart of a leader is his most important possession. Parshas Shoftim teaches that it can be his undoing - or, with the right partner, the foundation of everything he builds.

Stop Standing Still



BY RABBI ADAM LAW

וְלֹא תָקִים לְךָ מַצֵּבָה אֲשֶׁר שָׂנֵא ה' אֱלֹקֶיךָ

"Do not set up for yourself a standing stone which Hashem your G-d hates" (Devarim 16:22).

This pasuk, found in our parsha with many other laws, is hard to understand. The language of מַצֵּבָה implies a single stone monument. But we see that monuments are built by the Avos! Here, Yaakov with Lavan: וַיִּקַּח יַעֲקֹב אֶבֶן וַיְרִימֵהָ מַצֵּבָה – "And Yaakov took a stone and raised it up as a monument" (Bereshis 31:45).

So it would seem that a single stone monument itself is not the problem. So the key qualifier is obviously a מַצֵּבָה which G-d hates, as the pasuk delineates.

Rashi, based in the Sifrei, says this is a single stone which offerings are brought upon, even to G-d. An altar of many stones and of earth, G-d did command to make. But He specifically hates a standing stone used for bringing offerings, for they are a custom of the Canaanites. And that's even if they had been loved in the past by the Patriarchs! This is probably why the Torah uses the word "hate," which is a rarely used and strong word. This would be to counteract the fact that such practices were loved in the days of the Patriarchs.

A STANDING STONE INSIDE YOU

On a homiletic level the sefer Mei HaShiloach has an interesting drash of the pasuk. He reads it as saying you should not make yourself stubborn, a "standing stone," even in your service of Hashem.

He reads this into Rashi's understanding of how this particular service has been transformed from being loved in the days of the Patriarchs to hated in the time of Moshe. The Patriarchs' unique strength meant they were able to be מְסִירַת נֶפֶשׁ for all details, as that time needed, as Hashem's Kingship was then obscured. This implies then that such a practice would have always been hated, but the Avos were able to go so far to make it loved! We are not on their level in their time, however, so now we only give ourselves over to the known three things: idolatry, murder, and inappropriate relations.

Even in the service of G-d we should not set ourselves up as a standing stone.

The Mei HaShiloach says that even in the service of G-d we should not set ourselves up as a "standing stone." We should be able to learn from the practices of others and not judge those whose service looks different than our own. We should be able to adapt, within halacha, as the time needs, as daas Torah delineates (see the rest of the parsha). He adds that a person should also not be stubborn towards his friend and force his opinion on him, even when he's sure he's right.

THE MAIN PATH AND THE TWISTING ONE

The Baal Shem Tov (צַוָּאַת הָרִיבַ"שׁ 140) has a famous teaching on Tehillim 27:11 and Mishlei 3:6. Regarding the latter verse, בְּכָל דְּרָכֶיךָ דָּעֵהוּ וְהוּא יְיַשֵּׁר אֹרְחֹתֶיךָ – "In all your ways know Him, and He will straighten your paths." Here the Baal Shem Tov speaks about the main path, as well as twisting smaller paths. If you endeavor on the main path of G-d (Torah and mitzvos), He will support you as well during the twisty times.

This is important when viewing others in their service of G-d. The Baal Shem Tov implies there is really no such thing as "off the derech." Rather sometimes in a person's life he's on the main path, and other times seems to be lost. We never really know where somebody else is – but we do know that G-d is One, and impossible to escape His dominion.

Protecting the Choice



BY REB YACOV ABOUDI

Last week, in Re'eh, we spoke about the desire to do what is right. Re'eh is the moment of aspiration: I want to do what's right. Shoftim is where that desire is clarified: what is right is determined. And Shoterim is where that clarity is protected: the choice is safeguarded by putting up guards.

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רְאֵה אָנֹכִי נֹתֵן לִפְנֵיכֶם הַיּוֹם בְּרָכָה וּקְלָלָה

Hashem gives. Once we recognize that the gift cannot be separated from the Giver, receiving creates responsibility. The question becomes: What will I do with what I have been given?

That is בְּחִירָה – choice.

But most good choices do not disappear because we suddenly decide they were wrong.

They erode.

We choose patience, until we are tired. We choose gratitude, until disappointment grows louder. We choose guarded speech, until anger feels justified. We choose presence, until distraction becomes routine.

The choice was sincere. It simply suffered attrition.

THE JUDGE AND THE OFFICER

Perhaps that is why the Torah does not tell us only שֹׁפְטִים תִּתֶּן לְךָ, appoint judges. It says שֹׁפְטִים וְשֹׁטְרִים תִּתֶּן לְךָ בְּכָל שְׁעָרֶיךָ – appoint judges and officers in all your gates.

Rashi distinguishes between them. The judge (שׁוֹפֵט) determines the law; the officer (שׁוֹטֵר) ensures it is carried out.

Perhaps that is the next stage after Re'eh. Re'eh says: I want to do what is right. Shoftim determines what that right is. Shoterim safeguards it when the emotional weather changes, by putting up guards.

Without an officer, every frustration reopens a case already decided. Yesterday I chose patience; today I am angry. Yesterday I chose gratitude; today I am disappointed. Yesterday I chose careful speech; today I feel justified.

If every emotion gets another vote, even our best choices erode. This does not mean we never reconsider. It means we do not abandon clarity because it has become uncomfortable.

GUARDS AT THE GATES

The Shlah HaKadosh takes the Torah's command inward. Drawing on Sefer Yetzirah, he understands our "gates" as the eyes, ears, mouth, and other openings through which we engage the world. He writes: וְעַל אֵלּוּ הַשְּׁעָרִים יְשִׂים הָאָדָם לְעַצְמוֹ שׁוֹפְטִים וְשׁוֹטְרִים – a person must place judges and officers over these gates (Shelah HaKadosh, Torah Shebichtav, Shoftim, Derech Chaim 1).

A gate is not a wall. It decides what enters and what leaves. The Shlah is asking us to govern where our choices meet real life.

I may have chosen gratitude, but what do I keep focusing on? I may have chosen better speech, but what happens when I am angry? I may have chosen kedushah, but what am I still allowing in? I may have chosen presence, but what competes for it?

The judge (שׁוֹפֵט) defines what is right. The officer (שׁוֹטֵר) stands at the gate and protects it.

WHERE SHOFTIM MEETS ELUL

The Bnei Yissaschar writes: שֶׁזֶּהוּ הַתְחָלַת הַתְּשׁוּבָה וְעִקָּרָהּ – "This is the beginning of teshuvah and its essence" (Bnei Yissaschar, Ma'amarei Chodesh Elul, Ma'amar 1, Ot 10). He explains that we must place a judge and an officer (שׁוֹטֵר) at each gate, aligning our faculties with truth and guarding them.

Elul is not only about new resolutions. We already know much of what we want to change. The deeper question is: why haven't my existing choices survived?

Maybe I do not need another judge. Maybe I need an officer (שׁוֹטֵר) to protect the clarity I already have. I knew what mattered, but I left it undefended.

A meaningful choice needs protection.

Shoftim tells us: it will not survive on its own. This is the work toward Rosh Hashanah. We began with gratitude. Re'eh awakened desire. Shoftim clarifies. Shoterim preserves.

And now Shoftim asks: does my choice have enough protection to survive me on a hard day? Elul is not only about deciding who we want to become, but about guarding who we have already chosen to be.

So this week's question is: what good choice have I already made that I keep renegotiating, and what guard must I place at its gate?

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REFLECTIVE QUESTION

What guard must I place at the gate of a choice I have already made?

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