

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS ZT"l

Covenant & Conversation

At a dinner to celebrate the work of a communal leader, the guest speaker paid tribute to his many qualities: his dedication, hard work, and foresight. As he sat down, the leader leaned over and said, "You forgot to mention one thing." "What was that?" asked the speaker. The leader replied, "My humility."

Quite so. Great leaders have many qualities, but humility is usually not one of them. With rare exceptions they tend to be ambitious, with a high measure of self-regard. They expect to be obeyed, honoured, respected, even feared. They may wear their superiority effortlessly -- Eleanor Roosevelt called this "wearing an invisible crown" -- but there is a difference between this and humility.

This makes one provision in our parsha unexpected and powerful. The Torah is speaking about a king. Knowing, as Lord Acton put it, that power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely," it specifies three temptations to which a king in ancient times was exposed. A king, it says, should not accumulate many horses or wives or wealth -- the three traps into which, centuries later, King Solomon eventually fell. Then it adds:

"When [the king] is established on his royal throne, he is to write for himself on a scroll a copy of this Torah... It is to be with him, and he is to read it all the days of his life so that he may learn to be in awe of the Lord his God and follow carefully all the words of this law and these decrees and not feel superior to his brethren or turn from the law to the right or to the left. Then he and his descendants will reign a long time in the midst of Israel." (Deut. 17:18-20)

If a king, whom all are bound to honour, is commanded to be humble -- "not feel superior to his brethren" -- how much more so the rest of us. Moses, the greatest leader the Jewish people ever had, was "very humble, more so than anyone on the face of the earth" (Num. 12:3). Was it that he was great because he was humble, or humble because he was great? Either way, as R. Johanan said of God Himself, "Wherever you find His greatness, there you find His humility." (Pesikta Zutrata, Eikev)

This is one of the genuine revolutions Judaism brought about in the history of spirituality. The idea that a king in the ancient world should be humble would have

seemed farcical. We can still today see, in the ruins and relics of Mesopotamia and Egypt, an almost endless series of vanity projects created by rulers in honour of themselves. Ramses II had four statues of himself and two of Queen Nefertiti placed on the front of the Temple at Abu Simbel. At 33 feet high, they are almost twice the height of Lincoln's statue in Washington.

Aristotle would not have understood the idea that humility is a virtue. For him the megalopsychos, the great-souled man, was an aristocrat, conscious of his superiority to the mass of humankind. Humility, along with obedience, servitude, and self-abasement, was for the lower orders, those who had been born not to rule but to be ruled. The idea that a king should be humble was a radically new idea introduced by Judaism and later adopted by Christianity.

This is a clear example of how spirituality makes a difference to the way we act, feel, and think. Believing that there is a God in whose presence we stand means that we are not the centre of our world. God is. "I am dust and ashes," said Abraham, the father of faith. "Who am I?" said Moses, the greatest of the prophets. This did not render them servile or sycophantic. It was precisely at the moment Abraham called himself dust and ashes that he challenged God on the justice of His proposed punishment of Sodom and the cities of the plain. It was Moses, the humblest of men, who urged God to forgive the people, and if not, "Blot me out of the book You have written." These were among the boldest spirits humanity has ever produced.

There is a fundamental difference between two words in Hebrew: anava, "humility", and shiflut, "self-abasement". So different are they that Maimonides defined humility as the middle path between shiflut and pride. (Maimonides, Eight Chapters, ch. 4; Commentary to Avot 4:4. In Hilchot Teshuvah 9:1, Maimonides defines shiflut as the opposite of malchut, sovereignty.)

Humility is not low self-regard. That is shiflut. Humility means that you are secure enough not to need to be reassured by others. It means that you don't feel you have to prove yourself by showing that you are cleverer, smarter, more gifted, or more successful than others. You are secure because you live in God's love. He has faith in you even if you do not. You do not need to compare yourself to others. You have your task, they have theirs, and that leads you to co-operate, not compete.

This means that you can see other people and

value them for what they are. They are not just a series of mirrors at which you look only to see your own reflection. Secure in yourself you can value others. Confident in your identity you can value the people not like you. Humility is the self turned outward. It is the understanding that "It's not about you."

Already in 1979, the late Christopher Lasch published a book entitled *The Culture of Narcissism*, subtitled, *American Life in an Age of Diminished Expectations*. It was a prophetic work. In it he argued that the breakdown of family, community, and faith had left us fundamentally insecure, deprived of the traditional supports of identity and worth. He did not live to see the age of the selfie, the Facebook profile, designer labels worn on the outside, and the many other forms of "advertisements for myself", but he would not have been surprised. Narcissism, he argued, is a form of insecurity, needing constant reassurance and regular injections of self-esteem. It is, quite simply, not the best way to live.

I sometimes think that narcissism and the loss of religious faith go hand in hand. When we lose faith in God, what is left at the centre of consciousness is the self. It is no coincidence that the greatest of modern atheists, Nietzsche, was the man who saw humility as a vice, not a virtue. He described it as the revenge of the weak against the strong. Nor is it accidental that one of his last works was entitled, "Why I am So Clever." (Part of the work published as *Ecce Homo*.) Shortly after writing it he descended into the madness that enveloped him for the last eleven years of his life.

You do not have to be religious to understand the importance of humility. In 2014 the Harvard Business Review published the results of a survey that showed that "The best leaders are humble leaders." (Jeanine Prime and Elizabeth Salib, 'The Best Leaders are Humble Leaders', 12 May 2014) They learn from criticism. They are confident enough to empower others and praise their contributions. They take personal risks for the sake of the greater good. They inspire loyalty and strong team spirit. And what applies to leaders applies to each of us as marriage partners, parents, fellow-workers, members of communities, and friends.

One of the most humble people I ever met was the late Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson. There was nothing self-abasing about him. He carried himself with quiet dignity. He was self-confident and had an almost regal bearing. But when you were alone with him, he made you feel you were the most important person in the room. It was an extraordinary gift. It was "royalty without a crown." It was "greatness in plain clothes." It taught me that humility is not thinking you are small. It is thinking that other people have greatness within them.

Ezra Taft Benson said that "pride is concerned with who is right; humility is concerned with what is right." To serve God in love, said Maimonides, is to do what is truly right because it is truly right and for no other reason.

(Hilchot Teshuvah 10:2) Love is selfless. Forgiveness is selfless. So is altruism. When we place the self at the centre of our universe, we eventually turn everyone and everything into a means to our ends. That diminishes them, which diminishes us. Humility means living by the light of that-which-is-greater-than-me. When God is at the centre of our lives, we open ourselves up to the glory of creation and the beauty of other people. The smaller the self, the wider the radius of our world. *Covenant and Conversation is kindly supported by the Maurice Wohl Charitable Foundation in memory of Maurice and Vivienne Wohl zt"l* ©2023 The Rabbi Sacks Legacy Trust rabbisacks.org

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

This week's parsha emphasizes, albeit in an indirect fashion, the litigious nature of human society and the requirement for the appointment of judges to decide disputes and for police to enforce those decisions. A perfect world needs no judges or courts, police or bailiffs. Our very imperfect world cannot reasonably hope to function and exist in their absence. Law and order are the requirements for a commercially and civilly successful society. As such, judges and courts are the necessary check to prevent chaos and anarchy, But the Torah points out that there must always be necessary restraint on the powers of the courts and the police as well. And that check to judicial power is called justice and righteousness, as these concepts are defined and detailed by the Torah law and its traditions.

There is a special burden imposed by the Torah upon the judicial process, to somehow achieve not simply legally correct decisions, but a broader obligation to accomplish a sense of righteousness and justice in its general society. And the courts are bidden to be pursuers of justice and righteousness and not to satisfy themselves with seemingly correct legal conclusions, which narrowly construed, unfortunately can many times somehow lead to injustice and tragedy. There are many examples in the history of the Jewish people where judicial and even rabbinic decisions, seemingly legally correct, led to terrible disputes and tragedies simply because the general public did not feel that justice was done in the matter. Without the palpable presence of justice being present in our court system, we become a very divisive and spiritually sterile society.

Jewish tradition encourages compromise over hard and fast judicial decision. In fact, many great Jewish figures of the past and present, though personally involved in the world and practice of commerce, have prided themselves as never having been involved in any dispute that was submitted to a court of law or to a rabbinic tribunal. The emotional and monetary costs of pursuing a matter of contention in a judicial manner are telling and long lasting. This is especially true when a family or partnership dispute is involved. Those scars are

never completely healed. When I attended law school many decades ago, we were taught to abide by an adage attributed to Abraham Lincoln: "A poor settlement is still better than a good lawsuit."

Disputes disturb our sense of ego, and we feel that we must prevail, sometimes at enormous personal cost. We become captivated by the sense of our legal rights and lose sight that justice, righteousness and inner harmony can be better served by realizing that less is more and that legal victories are many times more pyrrhic than real. The prophet Yeshayahu calls to those that "pursue righteousness and justice" for they are the ones who truly seek "to find Godliness in their lives." We need judges, courts and police in all human societies. Nevertheless, the wise person will regard them as matters of last resort and not as the prime solution to the frictions and problems of everyday life. © 2023 Rabbi Berel Wein - Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at www.rabbiwein.com. For more information on these and other products visit www.rabbiwein.com

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

“You shall appoint judges...[who] will not pervert justice.... Justice, justice shall you pursue...

You shall not plant for yourselves an Asheira [tree used for purposes of idolatry, according to Rashi and Ibn Ezra] near the altar of the Lord your God." (Deuteronomy 16:18–21) The juxtaposition of these verses – the demand for honorable and righteous judges, the concern for an impartial legal system which is a "no bribe zone," immediately followed by the prohibition of idolatry – seems to mix two completely different areas of religious concern. It combines the moral and ethical laws of interpersonal conduct together with the ritual laws of divine service. Each of these two realms holds a respected place in the Bible, but why group them so closely together without any kind of segue between them?

Second, which of these two crimes is more grievous? Is it a corrupt judicial system which undermines the very infrastructure of an ethical society? Or is it a mistaken religious notion which calls for the worship of a tree instead of the worship of the Creator of the tree? Certainly the injurious implications emanating from the first seem far more damaging than those emanating from the second.

Indeed, the Bible itself adds a rider to the command to pursue justice: "in order that you may live and inherit the land which the Lord your God gives you." A just society is a necessary prerequisite for the continued life of historic Israel and for Israel's ability to retain sovereignty over her homeland. No such caveats or conditions appear pursuant to the prohibition of the Asheira.

Moreover, the Bible has already expressed its displeasure at those who worship trees or stones, which can neither see nor hear nor eat nor smell (Deuteronomy 4:28). Why prohibit worshipping the Asheira tree specifically if it is planted near the sacrificial altar? Is it not equally forbidden to serve a free-standing Asheira tree even if it is nowhere near the sanctuary (Mishkan) or Temple?

The Talmud (Avoda Zara 52a) makes a startling comparison, which begins to provide the solution to our questions: Resh Lakish said, "Anyone who appoints an unworthy judge is considered like someone who plants an Asheira tree in Israel, as it is written: 'You shall appoint judges and executors in all your gates' and it is written right next to it, 'You shall not plant for yourselves an Asheira tree.'" And R. Ashi added, "And if it is in a place where pious scholars are found, it is as if he planted the Asheira next to the sacrificial altar."

What I believe the sages are deriving from this juxtaposition of the biblical verses is that the real sin of idolatry lies in the perversion of justice perpetrated by the idolaters. This was found in their lack of morality and ethical conscience, in the orgiastic Dionysian rites, which included eating the limbs and drinking the blood of living animals and in the drunken trysts with temple prostitutes.

Idolaters paid no heed to "Thou shalt not murder" when they sacrificed innocent children to Molekh! And worst of all was when the immorality of idolatry invaded the hallowed gates of the Holy Temple. At that point, the entire reason for Israel's nationhood ceased to exist, so that God was forced to leave His House and see to it that it be destroyed.

The truth is that almost every time the Bible forbids idolatry, it is within the context of the immoral behavior which characterized it: Do not bow down to their gods, do not worship them and do not act according to their practices. (Exodus 23:24)

Guard yourself lest you seek out their gods.... They burn their sons and daughters in fire to their gods. (Deuteronomy 12:30–31)

You shall destroy the Hittites...in order that they not teach you to act according to all their abominations. (Deuteronomy 20:17–18)

Remember that God chose Abraham because he was committed to compassionate righteousness and moral justice (Genesis 18:18–19); on Tisha B'Av, the memorial day of our Temples' destruction, we read publicly the verse, "But let him who glories glory in this: Understand and know Me, that I am God who exercises loving-kindness, moral justice, and righteous compassion on the earth, for in these things do I delight," says the Lord" (Jeremiah 9:23).

Although Maimonides consistently defines idolatry in pure and absolute theological and metaphysical terms, Rabbi Menaḥem HaMeiri (13th and 14th century, Provence) defined idolatry in terms of the "disgusting immoral acts of the idolaters," whose

paganism prevented them from accepting the universal moral laws of the Noahide Covenant. For the Meiri, anyone who was moral was ipso facto not to be considered an idolater. In the final analysis, he understood that to know God is to pursue justice and righteousness; idolatry is not so much a sin of incorrect theological opinions as it is a sin of social corruption and immorality! ©2023 Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin

RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

An analysis of the Torah's approach to war reveals that war is only undertaken as a last resort. Consider the opening verse in the section dealing with war, "When you come close to a city to fight against it, then proclaim peace unto it" (Deuteronomy 20:10).

The Midrash maintains that this verse applies only to the first half of the paragraph that discusses optional wars (Sifrei 199). Hence, this part concludes with the words "thus shall you do [seek peace] to all the cities which are very far off from you, which are not of the cities of these nations" (Deuteronomy 20:10–15). But regarding the conquest of the seven Canaanite nations, obligatory war, peace overtures are not made. This is the intent of the second half of this paragraph (20:16–18).

Maimonides and Nachmanides both disagree. They insist that the opening verse, which outlines the obligation to seek peace first, encompasses the whole paragraph; thus, it is a general statement about both permissible and obligatory war. After all, Joshua offered peace to the Seven Canaanite nations, whom we were obligated to confront militarily. Maimonides and Nachmanides, however, agree that differences exist between the two types of wars. For example, in optional wars, exemptions are allowed.

But the bottom line is that, from their perspectives, peace is possible even with the Seven Nations, even with those who disdain ethical behavior. If they renounce their evil ways and abide by basic ethical principles, they will be allowed to remain in the land.

The call for peace – even to our extreme enemies – aligns with Judaism's constant pursuit of shalom. It's built into the Jewish DNA: one of God's names is Shalom; we greet and bid farewell with the word shalom; Shabbat is Shabbat Shalom; the Amidah closes with the prayer for shalom (sim shalom). So, too, the Grace after Meals and the Kaddish reach their crescendo with the prayer for peace (oseh shalom). This is no small matter, as the way we conduct ourselves in the everyday sets the tone for the way we act in the most extreme circumstances – like war.

As described by Maimonides and Nachmanides, even when conquering and liberating the biblical land of Israel, we hope for peace, a yearning that continues to this very day. ©2023 Hebrew Institute of Riverdale & CJC-AMCHA. Rabbi Avi Weiss is Founder and Dean of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, the Open Orthodox Rabbinical School, and

Senior Rabbi of the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale

ENCYCLOPEDIA TALMUDIT

Home Dedication

Translated by Rabbi Mordechai Weiss

Dedicating a home in Israel is a mitzva. This becomes clear in the following verse, which addresses the question of who goes out to fight in wartime and who is sent home: "Is there anyone who has built a new house but has not dedicated it (*chanacho*)? Let him go back to his home" (*Devarim* 20:5). Commentators explain that the verse is referring to a home that there is a mitzva to dedicate, and this must be in a place where there is a mitzva to live, namely the Land of Israel.

Dedicating something (*chinuch*) is usually associated with a beginning. So, when the verse says that the person "has not dedicated it," this means he has not started living there. More specifically, according to *Targum Yonatan*, it means he has not yet put up a *mezuzah*, while the Radak says that it means he has not yet had a meal there.

Some believe that a meal served at a home dedication or house-warming is not considered a *seudat mitzva* unless there are *divrei Torah* (words of Torah). Others maintain that in Israel, the meal of a home dedication is automatically a *seudat mitzva*, even without accompanying *divrei Torah*. It is only in the Diaspora that *divrei Torah* are required in order to transform the meal into a *seudat mitzva*.

Since buying a new item of clothing requires reciting the blessing of *Shehecheyanu*, it would certainly seem that buying a new home should require it as well. However, *Shehecheyanu* is recited only when the person is the only beneficiary of the new item. In general, a person buys a home for himself and his family. Therefore, *Shehecheyanu* is not recited. ©2017 Rabbi M. Weiss and Encyclopedia Talmudit

RABBI DAVID LEVIN

The Eglaruf, the Broken Calf

At the conclusion of this week's parasha, we find an unusual law concerning a corpse which is found in an open field. The Torah states, "If a corpse is found on the land that Hashem, your Elokim, gives you to possess it, fallen in the field, it was not known who struck him. Your elders and your judges will go out and they will measure to the cities that are around the corpse. It shall be that the city nearest the corpse, the elders of that city shall take a calf of cattle, with which no work has been done, which has not pulled with a yolk. The elders of that city shall bring the calf down to a firm valley, which has not been worked and has not been sown, and they shall break the back of the calf's neck in the valley. The Kohanim, the sons of Levi, shall approach, for them has

Hashem, your Elokim, 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. All the elders of that city, who are closest to the corpse, shall wash their hands over the calf whose neck was broken in the valley. They shall speak up and say, '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 Your people Israel!' Then the blood shall be atoned for them. And you shall remove the innocent blood from your midst, for you shall do what is upright in the eyes of Hashem."

There are several different approaches to this section of the Torah. One such approach is that the corpse referred to in this section is considered to be either a person who died in an area outside of a village because of neglect or murder. Since we are told, "kol Yisrael areivim zeh lazeh, all Israel is responsible one for the other," it is incumbent on the people of the community nearest to this corpse to take responsibility for his death. Ibn Ezra explains that the elders take responsibility because it is assumed that there was a level of sinfulness in the city or this tragedy would never have occurred in their vicinity. HaRav Zalman Sorotzkin explains that the blood of a murder cannot be atoned for by spilling of the blood of a sacrifice (the Eglu Arufa) alone, all of the B'nei Yisrael need an atonement for this act. The words of the Kohanim that are said over the Eglu Arufa, seek this atonement for all the city that is responsible for this corpse.

A different approach is taken by a number of commentators (Kli Yakar, Bal HaTurim, and others) based on the immediately previous connected sections of the Torah. Those sections all discussed various times of war, and the Kli Yakar points out that it is not uncommon to find a corpse outside of a city after a war. The Kli Yakar quotes the Gemara in Sotah (46a) that the reason for the Eglu Arufa is that this person was like a tree that was cut down before it was able to give off its fruit. This would imply a connection to the mitzvah of "be fruitful and multiply," which this person was not able to perform. This would connect our section of the Torah with a previous section of the Torah which discusses not cutting down fruit-bearing trees when attacking a city during war. In Gemara Taanit (7a), man is compared to a tree. "Now is a man a tree of the field? ...For you eat from it and you may not cut it down.' And also, what is written concerning a non-fruit-bearing tree, 'You shall destroy it and cut it down.' How so? In the case of a Torah scholar who is of proper character, 'you shall eat (learn) from him and not cut him down.' But in the case of a Torah scholar who is not of proper character, 'you shall destroy him and cut him down;' shun him." Here, the Kli Yakar certainly does not mean children when speaking of "fruit," but mitzvot instead. A Torah scholar who does not translate his learning into actions, is not a

worthy tree and should be cut down.

What was the process of the Eglu Arufa? When a corpse was found, two members of the Jerusalem Sanhedrin (the Upper Court) and two Elders would comprise the leaders who would measure the distance to the cities surrounding the corpse to determine which city was the closest. Since this was a "court" of sorts, it could not be an even number, so these four would choose another judge to be part of this party. Once the nearest city was determined, the leaders of that city would bring forth the unworked calf to begin the atonement. The Ramban explains that the animal was taken to a "hard" valley. This meant that the field had never been worked and would never be worked in the future. The animal was killed by cutting its head from the back of the neck. This was the opposite of the slaughtering process and meant that the animal could not be used for food, and its blood could not go on the altar.

Our Rabbis ask why the nearest city is chosen for atonement. Ibn Ezra explains that the nearest city might not be responsible for this death, but must be responsible for a similar death. That is why Hashem caused this corpse to appear close to that city, as a message to that city that it needs to seek atonement. The Ramban explains the Rambam's disagreement with this approach. The Rambam suggests that the purpose of the entire ceremony of the Eglu Arufa was to locate the murderer. The likeliest place to locate the murderer is in the nearest city to the crime. Interestingly, the Ramban explains that if even a maidservant had come forward and said that she knew the murderer, the calf would not be killed even though the murderer could never be convicted with this testimony. Punishment by Man was not the purpose of this process, but locating the guilty party absolved the entire city from its responsibility in the crime.

As part of the ceremony, the Elders say, "Our hands have not spilled this blood, and our eyes did not see." Rashi asks how one could possibly think that the Elders had spilled this blood. Rashi returns to our first understanding of the reason for this ceremony, that the corpse was somehow a result of neglect on the part of the city that was closest to the body. Rashi explains the words of the Elders to mean that "we did not notice that he left the city and therefore did not provide him with food and without an escort for protection." The Kohanim then say, "Atone for Your people Israel whom You have redeemed, O Hashem. Do not place innocent blood in the midst of Your people Israel!" Once this passage has been stated, the blood of the Eglu Arufa atoned for the people.

We return to the concept of "kol Yisrael areivim zeh lazeh, all Israel is responsible one for the other." This entire ceremony indicates that the whole town is responsible for this corpse, whether from neglect, lack of protection, or because murder was committed. But the

concept goes further; we are also all responsible for the actions of the murderer. If there was strife between members of the community, we must emulate Aharon HaKohein and help them to compromise and work out their dispute. Our actions might have been able to prevent this death. May we learn our responsibility to everyone through the ceremony of the Eglu Arufa.

© 2023 Rabbi D. Levin

RABBI JONATHAN GEWIRTZ

Migdal Ohr

The Levite Kohanim, the whole tribe of Levi, shall have no portion or territory with Israel; the fire offerings of Hashem and His portion shall they eat." (Devarim 18:1) Despite the fact that the Kohanim served a very important spiritual role in the nation, they were not supported by the government. There was no special tax created by the king or even the Sanhedrin to support these valuable Torah scholars. They received no land in Israel (save for the Levite cities, which were also cities of refuge, but not individually-owned) and did not take part in the spoils of war.

However, they did receive a financial stipend. They received the priestly gifts such as challah, Terumah, bechor (first-born animals), and the foreleg, jaw, and stomach of slaughtered animals. The Levi'im received maaser tithes. Though they came from the Jews, these were considered to be directly from Hashem, as though the people of Shevet Levi were eating at Hashem's table.

Why was it so important for the Kohanim to live with financial uncertainty? Why could they not have a portion in the land and share the wealth with the rest of the Jewish people? What was the message of excluding them from living like everyone else?

Perhaps we can infer some guidance from the phrase, "hakohanim halevi'im," which implies a single group of people, not the two groups called priests and Levites. When Leah named her son, Levi, she said, "This time my husband will accompany me (yelaveh.)" The people we're speaking about here are religious teachers intended to accompany the Jews on their life's journeys. They are not meant to mingle or become a single unit with the other tribes, because they need to maintain their autonomy in order to properly guide.

If the Kohanim were to have their own land and share spoils like everyone else, they might forget their real mission. They were intended to teach the people and be an extension of Hashem, Himself, who is called the Teacher of Torah to His People Israel. Therefore, their sustenance had to be G-dly, to remind them of their place.

The Ohr HaChaim points out that this portion comes after that of the king, to say that even the king must give the priestly gifts as the rest of the populace do. This is so his heart shouldn't soar and he feel himself above the mitzvos of Hashem. That may be why, when

the king is commanded to write a copy of the Torah for himself, it must be made from a Torah which is, "before the kohanim halevi'im." By maintaining their independence, they ensure the Torah does not become sullied or influenced by material considerations, both in a literal and figurative way.

The way to ensure the integrity of Torah is to recognize where it, and everything in our lives, comes from – from the loving, beneficent hand of Hashem. Then we will not try to change it or manipulate it as we see fit. Instead, we will work to change ourselves, as Hashem sees fit.

R' Yeruchom Levovitz wanted to leave the Mir Yeshiva (where he was the legendary Mashgiach) to go live in Kelm. He faced all sorts of obstacles that were clearly orchestrated from Heaven. He decided to perform a Goral HaGra (a spiritual lottery using a Chumash) to determine his path and came to a pasuk that shook him deeply.

"B'Tab'os HaAron Yihyu HaBadim, Lo Yasuru Mimenu - the poles of the Aron should remain in their rings and not be removed." (Teruma 25:15) Unlike the other vessels in the Mishkan, the Torah says the poles of the Aron must remain fixed in their place even if the Bnei Yisroel were not traveling.

Reb Yeruchom wrote the lesson he learned is that the "poles" are the people who help carry the torch of Torah. Those people should never leave their positions, just like the poles cannot leave the Aron.
© 2023 Rabbi J. Gewirtz & Migdal Ohr

RABBI AVI SHAFRAN

Cross-Currents

Harvard psychology professor Steven Pinker once asked students if they would rather face the vicissitudes of their lives or be transformed into totally happy pigs. A young woman raised her hand and said, "I'd rather be a happy pig." Other hands shot up. "Me too!" "Same here!" "Pig!" "Pig!" "Pig!"

R' Levi Yitzchok of Berditchev conveys a pithy thought on the wording of the parsha's prohibition against bowing down before "the sun, moon or other heavenly bodies that I have not commanded" (Devarim 17:3).

The Berditchever notes that it is permitted to bow to a human being. And indeed, Avraham bowed to his guests who appeared in the guise of men; Yosef's brothers bowed to him. Ovadiah bowed before his master Eliyahu.

Why is that permitted? Explained the Berditchever: People, by virtue of our being commanded creations, intended to not just exist but to shoulder responsibility, are singular parts of creation. Our being commanded exalts us, places us on a plane above everything else in the universe.

The sun and the moon -- and animals -- are not charged, or able, to choose. They are bound by their

natures and their instincts. Not so, us.

The phrase "that I have not commanded," above is understood by Rashi as "that I have not commanded you to worship." The Berditchever, however, sees something else in the phrase: "that I have not graced with commandments." That are not, in other words, commanded, and thus exalted, entities like humans are.

On Rosh Hashanah, which rapidly approaches, we are judged for our choices. And yet it is a festive holiday. Because even as we face our failures and stand *kivnei maron*, "like sheep," before the Judge of all, we celebrate. Because we are, in the end, not sheep, nor mindlessly happy pigs. We are commanded beings -- something that should fill us with joy. ©2023 Rabbi A. Shafran and torah.org

DR. ERICA BROWN

The Torah of Leadership

What do you do?"

"I'm in compliance."

"That's a very important job."

"You're the first person who's said that to me. Most people see me and walk in the opposite direction."

This was my conversation with a lovely young woman I met after giving a class recently. She laughed then shrugged as she admitted that she's not the most popular person in her office. Instead of viewing compliance as a critical mechanism to keep an organization ethical, the people she works with may regard her as an uncomfortable, judgmental presence.

The researchers who wrote "Corruption, Fast or Slow? Ethical Leadership Interacts With Machiavellianism to Influence Intuitive Thinking and Corruption" (Frontiers in Psychology, Nov. 2020) conclude that, "Ethical leaders play a role as models, use reward and punishment to decrease unethical behavior and stimulate ethical conduct." You cannot hope that people will behave ethically in the workplace. You have to model it and build it into systems.

In this week's parsha, Shoftim, we find an unambiguous statement about judging others with the highest moral standards and expecting compliance: "You shall not judge unfairly: you shall show no partiality; you shall not take bribes, for bribes blind the eyes of the wise and upset the plea of the just" (Deut. 16:19). Whereas sometimes the Torah is authoritative and didactic in its presentation of commandments, here it is explanatory. The verse tells us what taking bribes can do both to the judge and to those being judged.

Rashi here writes poignantly that at no time during the presentation of a case, should a judge "be lenient to one and harsh to the other" and gives a simple illustration. A judge asks one party to stand and the other to sit as he listens to a case. This visible display of difference may falsely and even unwittingly communicate a preference. Judges must review every one of their small actions and gestures and what they

may inadvertently communicate.

Rashi, citing BT Shevuot 30a, then moves from the judge to those being judged. Should there be even the slightest hint of favoritism, the litigant who feels disrespected may be hampered in his plea. Once he thinks there is any bribery or preference in a case, he may feel defeated and lose all confidence. What's the point of making a case if the judge has already predetermined the outcome?

Someone told me that during meetings of his senior team, the CEO regularly looked at the second most senior person in the room for approval or rolled her eyes at that employee to show disagreement with something that was said. This gesture was slight. No speaking was involved, but pretty soon other members of the team self-censored and did not speak up about important issues. The room was not safe. They felt they would be judged unfavorably so they kept quiet. When this behavior was brought to the CEO's attention, she instantly denied it. "I don't know what you're talking about."

Rashi, on our same verse, also states that when a judge takes a bribe, no matter how much he thinks he can be impartial, he cannot: "As soon as he has accepted a bribe, it is impossible for him not to incline his heart to that one and try to find something in his favor." Rashi bases himself on a passage in the Talmud that explicates our verse, BT Ketubot 105b. There, the sages discussed what this verse adds to our understanding of Jewish justice since all the way back in Exodus 23:8, we learned, "You shall take no bribe." The Talmud concludes that even in a case where there is no concern that justice will be perverted, a judge should, nevertheless, not take anything from any litigant. In this country today, there are strict and intricate gift-giving restrictions in place for government employees lest accepting a gift – even one of nominal monetary value – influence judgment, even subconsciously. This is where compliance work does its heavy lifting.

The Talmud continues in its interpretation of our verse: "for bribes blind the eyes of the wise." If bribes can blind the eyes of the wise, the sages concur, then they can certainly blind the eyes of a fool. Is a fool likely to be appointed as a judge? We assume that only those who are intelligent, discerning, and knowledgeable would be selected to such positions. But this is not always the case. When a wise person takes a bribe, the Talmud states, "he will not leave this world without suffering blindness of the heart." He will become a fool.

Compliance regulations in all fields help us check our conscious and unconscious biases and prevent us from making small errors of judgments that may become larger over time if not monitored and supervised. This is true for judges and in all arenas of leadership. We carry our beliefs and our biases with us wherever we go and in whatever we do. And at times, when we find ourselves faltering, our values carry us.

When did partiality – in work or within your family – hurt you? When did you hurt others with your unfair display of preference? ©2023 Dr. E. Brown & yu.org

SHLOMO KATZ

Hama'ayan

R' Moshe Schwab z"l (1918-1979) writes: With the arrival of the month of Elul, we are faced with the question, "What is Elul?" How is this month different from every other month? R' Yisrael Salanter z"l said, "Every month should be Elul, but Elul is Elul." R' Schwab explains: All year long, a person should act the way we try to act during Elul. At least, when Elul arrives, one should be aware that his life, both the material and spiritual aspects, hangs in the balance. This is true of oneself, of one's family, and of every member of the Jewish People.

Elul is the time to prepare for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, the days on which, we believe with perfect faith, we will be judged. We understand that everything that will happen, whether on a personal or communal level, depends on those days. Yet, one cannot "leap" into Rosh Hashanah. One must prepare for it. To the degree that one prepares himself, to that extent he will experience Rosh Hashanah. Conversely, to the degree that one is lax in preparing for Rosh Hashanah, to that extent he will miss out when Rosh Hashanah comes.

A person who knows that he has a court date in the distant future does not let his life be overshadowed by that upcoming event. However, as that date looms near, the litigant begins to fixate on it. So should we be when Elul approaches. All year long, we know that Rosh Hashanah is in the distant future, and we ignore it. When Elul comes, it is time to start focusing on our upcoming court date. Chazal say that on Rosh Hashanah, "Every living creature passes before Hashem." This really means, "Every living creature." There are no exceptions. (Ma'arachei Lev Vol. I, p. 57)

"So that his heart does not become haughty over his brethren and not turn from the commandment right or left, so that he will prolong years over his kingdom, he and his sons amid Yisrael." (17:20) R' Hillel Lichtenstein z"l (1814-1891; Hungary and Galicia) writes: We learn in Pirkei Avot, "If one's fear of Heaven precedes his wisdom, his wisdom will persist." Fear of Heaven is the foundation for remembering one's Torah studies.

This may be alluded to in our verse, R' Lichtenstein writes. Our Sages say that if one is haughty, he will forget his wisdom. And they say, "Who are royalty? Torah scholars!" Thus, our verse could be read: If one is not haughty and one does not deviate right or left from the Mitzvot--i.e., if he has fear of Heaven--then he and his descendants will remain royalty, i.e., Torah scholars. (Shiyarei Maskil 1:4)

Rambam z"l writes: Do not think that Teshuvah / repentance is necessary only for bad deeds. Rather, just as one must repent from bad deeds, so one must seek out his De'ot ra'ot (loosely translated: character flaws) and repent from those also. These may include: anger, hatred, jealousy, competitiveness, mockery, lust for money or honor, lust for food, etc. From all of these, one must repent. This, Rambam adds, is more difficult than repenting from bad deeds because, when a person is immersed in these, it is very difficult to extricate himself. (Hil. Teshuvah 7:3)

R' Gershon Edelstein z"l (1923-2023; Rosh Yeshiva of the Ponovezh Yeshiva) comments: This teaches that a person must repent from having bad Middot / character traits. Even someone who was born with bad Middot, to whom they are natural, must change his nature and correct those Middot. Admittedly, changing one's nature is very difficult work!

R' Edelstein continues: There are tactics that can help a person correct his Middot. The first is Torah study, which the Gemara (Kiddushin 30b) describes as the antidote to the Yetzer Ha'ra. The more one attaches himself to the Torah, the more it influences him to perfect his character.

Second, R' Edelstein adds, prayer can help a person correct his character flaws. For example, we pray (at the end of Shemoneh Esrei), "Guard my tongue from evil and my lips from speaking deceit," asking Hashem to help us correct bad Middot that involve action (speaking). We continue, "To those who curse me, let my soul be silent, and let my soul be like dust to everyone." Here we ask Hashem to help us develop humility, which, in turn, will help us not be pained when others offend us. Indeed, humility is the key to correcting many bad Middot.

However, R' Edelstein continues, prayer is not enough. One must work on his character using the tools of Chochmat Ha'nefesh (loosely translated, knowing oneself) taught by Sifrei Mussar / works on character improvement. One cannot repair his Middot without studying Mussar, R' Edelstein writes. As R' Yisrael Lipkin z"l (1810-1883; "R' Yisrael Salanter"; founder of the Mussar movement) said: "Changing oneself without studying Mussar is like trying to see without eyes or hear without ears."

R' Edelstein adds: There is a great benefit to studying Mussar, for though such works one knows what sins and shortcomings one must correct. In addition, Mussar works give advice on how to change one's nature, and what actions are helpful. As is well known, a person is influenced by his actions. Part of fulfilling the obligation to repent, R' Edelstein concludes, is engaging in steps that lead to repairing one's Middot. (Asifat Shemuot: Tishrei p.182) ©2022 S. Katz and torah.org

