

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI MORDECHAI WEISS

Guarding our Gates and Pursuing Justice

The Torah in Parashat Shoftim says: "שופטים ושוטרים – תתן לך בכל שעריך" – "Appoint for yourself judges and officers in all your gates." The judges are told to act fairly and justly, and the verse concludes: "צדק – צדק תרדוף" – "Justice, justice you shall pursue." The double wording of צדק hints to something deeper: not only should the outcome be just, but the means of achieving it must be just as well. This is a theme woven throughout Sefer Devarim—pursuing what is right in a way that is right.

A few verses later, we read: "תמים תהיה עם ה' – אלוקיך" – "Be wholehearted with Hashem your God." It is a call to integrity and sincerity, even when doing the right thing is inconvenient or difficult.

Chassidic commentaries explain that the command to place "judges and officers" at "all your gates" does not only refer to the city gates but also to the gates of our own bodies: our eyes, our ears, our nostrils, and our mouth. Each of these gates can close—the eyes can shut, the ears can be covered, the nose can be pinched. The mouth, however, has two gates: the lips and the teeth. Why two? Because the mouth is the hardest to guard. Speech is powerful—sometimes more damaging than sight or hearing—and so we have been given a double barrier to help us control it. Lashon hara, gossip, and careless words escape easily if we do not place proper "judges and officers" at this gate.

I remember going to the movies in 1962, and there was a scene that (for those days) was inappropriate. I turned away. My future wife was with me, and she said, "I guess that's what you learned in Kerem B'Yavneh—knowing when not to look." That stuck with me. A small moment, but it reflected a choice to guard one of those gates.

The parashah also confronts a hard reality: even people we admire can fail. We tend to think that rabbis, leaders, and teachers are immune to corruption, but the Torah doesn't share that illusion. It warns: "לא – לא תגנוב", "לא תרצח", "לא תענה ברעך עד שקר". These commandments exist not because no one would dare to do such things, but precisely because they can happen—even among those in high positions. And

when they do, it is a chillul Hashem, a desecration of God's name.

We've seen it in our times—respected figures who have stolen, abused, or betrayed trust. The Torah acknowledges this human weakness and commands us to build systems of accountability. Even King Shlomo, the wisest of men, was led astray by the foreign influences in his house. If he could stumble, none of us are beyond temptation.

So, what do we take from Shoftim? First, the responsibility to pursue justice everywhere—in our communities, in our leadership, in how we deal with others. But also, the responsibility to set up our own inner "courts"—to watch our eyes, our ears, our words, and to ask: who is judging what comes in, and what goes out? If we do that, we not only build fairer communities; we build truer selves. © 2025 Rabbi M. Weiss Rabbi Mordechai Weiss is the former Principal of the Bess and Paul Sigal Hebrew Academy of Greater Hartford and the Hebrew Academy of Atlantic County where together he served for over forty years. He and his wife D'vorah live in Efrat. All comments are welcome at ravmordechai@aol.com

RABBI BEREL WEIN ZT"l

Wein Online

We are all in favor of equality and justice. The goal of all democratic societies is to have, as far as humanly possible, an incorruptible and fair judicial system. Since, however, judges are only human – no matter how knowledgeable and altruistic they may be, the perfect judicial system has never yet been achieved.

Nevertheless, in order to make society livable, we are bidden to obey the decisions of the court. As the Talmud itself points out, "even if they proclaim to you that left is right and right is left, you want to listen to them." The Talmud acknowledges that judicial error is a facet of life....for after all, left is never right and right is never left. So, how are judicial errors ever to be corrected?

The answer to that question usually comes with the passage of time and with the application of common sense to the realities of life. The famous dictum in Jewish life has always been "what wisdom cannot accomplish, time will." Heaven, so to speak, also takes a hand over time in adjusting erroneous judicial decisions and somehow making things come out right in the end.

Yet, the Torah emphasizes to us that even though judicial error is possible if not even probable, we are to follow the decisions of our judges for otherwise anarchy will reign and society will dissolve. The decisions of judges may be analyzed and even disagreed with, but judges are to be respected and their judgments eventually are to be fulfilled. Ultimate justice is relegated to the provinces of Heavenly guidance.

Jewish tradition ascribes judicial decisions not merely to book knowledge and even to precedent, but also to common sense and an intuition of fairness and equity. The great Rabbi Israel Lipkin of Salant often pointed out that Heaven alone can take into account all of the facets, consequences and results of judgment, reward and punishment. The human judge is limited in perspective and foresight.

We are all aware of the law of unintended consequences, which dog all legislation and judicial decision. It is because of this that the Talmud ruefully has God, so to speak, busy undoing many of the decisions and actions of leaders and ordinary people in order to achieve the Divine will and purpose in the actions and decisions of humans.

All judicial systems contain a process of review and appeal from decisions made by lower courts. This is an inherent realization the judicial error is present and likely in all human affairs. It is of little wonder then that the phrase "trial and error" is so well known in the English language. The judicial system always attempts to correct and analyze itself. However, even in so doing, it is always subject to bias, preconceived notions and erroneous logic and decisions. Nevertheless the Torah emphasizes that judicial systems are mandatory for society to function. It is one of the basic seven laws of Noachide tradition. So, as in every other facet of life, the Torah bids us to do the best that we can but to be aware of our human limitations. © 2025 Rabbi B. Wein zt"l - 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 LORD JONATHAN SACKS ZT"l

Covenant & Conversation

There is a fascinating detail in the passage about the king in this week's parsha. The text says that "When he takes the throne of his kingdom, he must write for himself a copy of this Torah on a scroll before the levitical priests" (Deut. 17:18). He must "read it all the days of his life" so that he will be God-fearing and never break Torah law. But there is another reason also: so that he will "not begin to feel superior to his brethren" (Kaplan translation), "so that his heart be not haughty over his brothers" (Robert Alter). The king had to have humility. The highest in the land should not feel himself to be the highest in the land.

This is hugely significant in terms of the Jewish understanding of political leadership. There are other commands directed to the king. He must not accumulate horses so as not to establish trading links with Egypt. He should not have too many wives for "they will lead his heart astray." He should not accumulate wealth. These were all standing temptations to a king. As we know and as the sages pointed out, it was these three prohibitions that Solomon, wisest of men, broke, marking the beginning of the long slow slide into corruption that marked much of the history of the monarchy in ancient Israel. It led, after his death, to the division of the kingdom.

But these were symptoms, not the cause. The cause was the feeling on the part of the king that, since he is above the people he is above the law. As the rabbis said (Sanhedrin 21b), Solomon justified his breach of these prohibitions by saying: the only reason that a king may not accumulate wives is that they will lead his heart astray, so I will marry many wives and not let my heart be led astray. And since the only reason not to have many horses is not to establish links with Egypt, I will have many horses but not do business with Egypt. In both cases he fell into the trap of which the Torah had warned. Solomon's wives did lead his heart astray (1 Kings 11:3), and his horses were imported from Egypt (1 Kings 10:28-29). The arrogance of power is its downfall. Hubris leads to nemesis.

Hence the Torah's insistence on humility, not as a mere nicety, a good thing to have, but as essential to the role. The king was to be treated with the highest honour. In Jewish law, only a king may not renounce the honour due to his role. A parent may do so, so may a rav, so may even a nasi, but not a king (Kiddushin 32a-b). Yet there is to be a complete contrast between the external trappings of the king and his inward emotions.

Maimonides is eloquent on the subject: "Just as the Torah grants him [the king] great honour and obliges everyone to revere him, so it commands him to be lowly and empty at heart, as it says: 'My heart is empty within me' (Ps. 109:22). Nor should he treat Israel with overbearing haughtiness, for it says, 'so that his heart be not haughty over his brothers' (Deut. 17:20).

"He should be gracious and merciful to the small and the great, involving himself in their good and welfare. He should protect the honour of even the humblest of men. When he speaks to the people as a community, he should speak gently, as it says, 'Listen my brothers and my people....' (1 Chronicles 28:2), and similarly, 'If today you will be a servant to these people...' (1 Kings 12:7).

"He should always conduct himself with great humility. There was none greater than Moses, our teacher. Yet he said: 'What are we? Your complaints are not against us' (Ex. 16:8). He should bear the

nation's difficulties, burdens, complaints and anger as a nurse carries an infant." (Maimonides, Laws of Kings 2:6)

The model is Moses, described in the Torah as "very humble, more so than any person on the face of the earth" (Num. 12:3). "Humble" here does not mean diffident, meek, self-abasing, timid, bashful, demure or lacking in self-confidence. Moses was none of these. It means honouring others and regarding them as important, no less important than you are. It does not mean holding yourself low; it means holding other people high. It means roughly what Ben Zoma meant when he said (Avot 4:1), "Who is honoured? One who honours others." This led to one of the great rabbinic teachings, contained in the siddur and said on Motsei Shabbat: "Rabbi Jochanan said, Wherever you find the greatness of the Holy One, blessed be He, there you find His humility. This is written in the Torah, repeated in the Prophets, and stated a third time in the Writings. It is written in the Torah: 'For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great, mighty and awe-inspiring God, who shows no favoritism and accepts no bribe.' Immediately afterwards it is written, 'He upholds the cause of the orphan and widow, and loves the stranger, giving him food and clothing'..." (Megillah 31a)

God cares for all regardless of rank, and so must we, even a king, especially a king. Greatness is humility.

In the context of the Diamond Jubilee of Queen Elizabeth the Second, there is a story worth telling. It happened in St James Palace on 27 January 2005, the sixtieth anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz. Punctuality, said Louis XVIII of France, is the politeness of kings. Royalty arrives on time and leaves on time. So it is with the Queen, but not on this occasion. When the time came for her to leave, she stayed. And stayed. One of her attendants said he had never known her to linger so long after her scheduled departure time.

She was meeting a group of Holocaust survivors. She gave each survivor- it was a large group- her focussed, unhurried attention. She stood with each until they had finished telling their personal story. One after another, the survivors were coming to me in a kind of trance, saying, "Sixty years ago I did not know whether I would be alive tomorrow, and here I am today talking to the Queen." It brought a kind of blessed closure into deeply lacerated lives. Sixty years earlier they had been treated, in Germany, Austria, Poland, in fact in most of Europe, as subhuman, yet now the Queen was treating them as if each were a visiting Head of State. That was humility: not holding yourself low but holding others high. And where you find humility, there you find greatness.

It is a lesson for each of us. R. Shlomo of Karlin said, Der grester yetser hora is az mir fargest az mi is ein ben Melekh, "The greatest source of sin is to forget we are children of the King." We say Avinu Malkenu,

"Our Father, our King." It follows that we are all members of a royal family and must act as if we are. And the mark of royalty is humility.

The real honour is not the honour we receive but the honour we give. *Covenant and Conversation* is kindly sponsored by the Schimmel Family in loving memory of Harry (Chaim) Schimmel zt"l © 2025 The Rabbi Sacks Legacy Trust rabbisacks.org

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 (Deut. 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." (Ex. 23:24)

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

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

Remember that God chose Abraham because he was committed to compassionate righteousness and moral justice (Gen 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" (Jer. 9:23).

Although Maimonides consistently defines idolatry in pure and absolute theological and metaphysical terms, Rabbi Menachem HaMeiri (thirteenth and fourteenth 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 correct theological opinions as it is a sin of social corruption and immorality. *The above article appears in Rabbi Riskin's book Devarim: Moses Bequeaths Legacy, History and Covenant, part of his Torah Lights series of commentaries on the weekly parsha, published by Maggid and available for purchase at bit.ly/RiskinDevarim. © 2025 Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi*

S. Riskin

RABBI AVI SHAFRAN

Cross-Currents

It is explicit in the text of the Torah that those who went to war in the conquest of Cna'an knew that their lives could be lost in battle: "lest he die and another...." (Devarim 20:5) And that anyone "who is fearful or fainthearted..." (20:8) would be exempt from it.

Even among the brave, though, one imagines that the possibility of dying, even if fully recognized and accepted, would cause anguish. And yet, what are described as being sources of anguish to a fighter, even one ready to give up his life, are the thoughts that someone else might assume his place in occupying his new home, in harvesting his new vineyard, in a new marriage.

That points to a fundamental, if illogical, part of human nature. Losing out on something feels bad, but losing out to someone else is worse. In fact, a low salary has been shown to be less stressful on its own than the knowledge that someone else with the same skills and job is making more money. And when the anguish of "losing out" to someone else is compounded with the idea that the other's "win" happens even before one has had a chance to experience the fruits of his labor, as in the exempted soldiers' cases, it is all the more intense.

The inclination to envy, born of the sense of self, comes easily to us. In fact, it is inherent to being human.

That a sense of self isn't a sin is evident in a Midrash brought by Rashi on the pasuk "uvicheit yechemasni imi" (Tehillim 51:7); Dovid Hamelech lamented the fact that when his parents conceived him, their intent was basically selfish (a thought reflected as well in his words ki avi vi'im azovuni, Tehillim 27:10). And yet, Dovid's father was Yishai, who we are told (Shabbos 55b) died sinless.

We are, of course, admonished to not feed feelings of jealousy (Devarim 5:18), to not allow them to bring us to covet what another person has. But the initial feeling of resentment is part and parcel of being a human being. It's the dwelling on it, intensifying it, that is wrong.

Its appearance, however, should not make us feel despair, only human, and challenged to resist it. © 2025 Rabbi A. Shafraan and torah.org

RABBI DAVID LEVIN

The Higher Court

In Parashat Shoftim, Moshe stressed to the B'nei Yisrael the importance of the court system and the processes used to determine the truth in any dispute or transgression. There are cases, however, which may prove too difficult for a lower court to declare

judgment. The Torah deals with these cases and outlines the proper procedure to follow.

The Torah states: "If a matter of judgment will be hidden from you, between blood and blood, between verdict and verdict, or between affliction and affliction, matters of dispute in your cities – you shall rise and ascend to the place that Hashem, your Elokim, shall choose. You shall come to the Kohanim, the Leviim, and to the judge who will be in those days; you shall inquire, and they will tell you the word of judgment. You shall do according to the word that they will tell you, from the place that Hashem will choose, and you shall be careful to do according to everything that they will tell you. According to the teaching that they will teach you, and according to the judgment that they will say to you, shall you do; you shall not turn from the word that they will tell you, right or left. And the man that will act with willfulness, not listening to the Kohen who stands there to serve Hashem, your Elokim, or to the judge; that man shall die, and you shall destroy the evil from among Yisrael. The entire nation shall listen and fear, and they shall not act willfully any more."

HaRav Shamshon Raphael Hirsch explains that this passage begins with the establishment of the Supreme Court, the court of the seventy-one judges, the Sanhedrin. These verses "appoint the supreme court sitting at the central point of the nation at the Sanctuary of the Torah, to be the highest ultimate authority on whose shoulders rests the responsibility for the authentic tradition and interpretation of the Torah, as well as making all arrangements for its being kept correctly." This supreme court made decisions about the law that all who were under it had to accept and put into practice. Since these decisions were based solely on Hashem's Laws, written and oral, it was appropriate that the Sanhedrin sat the closest of any court to the Holy of Holies, where the Torah resided in the Ark.

When the Torah says, "a matter of judgment will be hidden from you," it is speaking of a lower court, a local court found in most cities. HaRav Hirsch explains that the word used for "hidden" is *yipalei*, a word which comes from "*palei*, a miracle, to designate such an event which occurs without any connection with the existing order of things, and completely independent of it, as a pure act of the Will of Hashem's almighty power." In the case brought here to the lower court, one must keep in mind that "each member of the court was one who was "fully qualified to make decisions, (was) well versed in the Law and not of one who (was) altogether not called on to make decisions on points of the Law." In spite of each member's qualifications, the case in question could be either too complex, the punishment too serious, or the Law involved a decision which is hidden from one with less experience. Our Rabbis explain that the lower courts were not necessarily fully versed in all areas of the Law. In such a case, the supreme court was the place

for this decision.

The Torah states: "You shall come to the Kohanim, the Leviim, and to the judge who will be in those days; you shall inquire, and they will tell you the word of judgment." HaRav Zalman Sorotzkin tells us that this entire section is written in the singular to indicate that those who approach the courts do not do so as antagonist and protagonist, guilty and innocent, one side against another, but as one person, unified in the effort to discover the Truth in the Law as it applies to their case. The Amek Davar explains that the Kohanim and the Leviim does not necessarily refer to the tribe of Levi, but instead to the wisest men of Torah Law in the Land. HaRav Sorotzkin suggests that the Sanhedrin should include Kohanim and Leviim who would teach the Law to the people, but this was not required, because the Crown of Torah was given to all the B'nei Yisrael.

The Torah uses three verbs to describe bringing a case to Jerusalem, to the higher courts: (1) *v'kamta*, you will rise up, (2) *v'alita*, you will go up, and (3) *u'vata*, you will go. HaRav Sorotzkin explains that this was a reference to the three courts that were found on the Temple Mount: (1) a court of twenty-three judges that was located at the opening of the Temple Mount, (2) a court of twenty-three judges located at the opening of the Azara, and (3) the court of seventy-one (the Sanhedrin) located in the *lishkat hagazit*, the cell of the hewn stone, one of the compartments within the building on the Mount. A person seeking judgment would approach the first court, which would either pass judgment or send him to the second court. If the second court decided to forego judgment, he would then approach the supreme court for judgment.

The Torah states: "According to the teaching that they will teach you, and according to the judgment that they will say to you, shall you do; you shall not turn from the word that they will tell you, right or left." Rashi explains that even if the Sanhedrin will proclaim that left is right or right is left, one must follow its decision. The Ramban states, "You are not to say, 'How can I [permit myself to] eat this real forbidden fat, or execute this innocent man;' instead you are to say, 'Hashem, Who enjoined the commandments, commanded that I perform all His commandments in accordance with all that they, who stand before Him in the place that He shall choose, teach me to do. He gave me the Torah as taught by them, even if they were to err.'" The Ramban understood the importance of this law. There would occur new situations, "newly arising matters," which would not have been directly covered by the Torah. These situations could cause widespread disagreements in the Torah unless there was a central body which interpreted these new matters in the light of the Torah's Laws and presented a unified understanding of how the Torah applies to these new situations.

The court system in Yisrael is very important. Hashem gave us the Torah in the written form and in the oral form which explained the Laws in greater detail. This was later written down in the Mishnah which led to the written Talmud. These laws were crucial to the people who would study them daily, argue about them much as the courts did in their days, and finally come to a decision on the ways to practice this Law or apply any new matters to the Law. Just as in the time of the courts, only the wisest Rabbis can make a communal decision. Our responsibility is to study the Torah daily to help us understand the decisions which are made. May we continue our studies to fulfill that responsibility. © 2025 Rabbi D. Levin

RABBI JONATHAN GEWIRTZ

Migdal Ohr

"Lest his heart become haughty from his brothers, and lest he veer from the commandments right or left..." (Devarim 17:20) A Jewish King was not intended to be like the monarchs of any other nation. Far from considering themselves godlike, as did Pharaoh, or even more privileged, the Jewish King was not above the law. In fact, in order to keep him in check, he had guidelines that no other kings had.

A Jewish king was limited in how many women he could marry, how many horses he could acquire, and how much wealth he could amass. He also had to have two special Torahs written for himself, one of which had to accompany him always. The Torah sums up the restrictions by informing us that they are intended to prevent him from becoming haughty over his bretheren, so he might lead a long, successful career as monarch, and that if they were worthy, his children could ascend the throne after him.

Some commentaries say it was specifically the prohibition of amassing undue wealth which would lead to his feeling superior to his brethren. If that is the case, why interpolate the verses about writing the Sefer Torah from which he was to learn?

The Ramban suggests that if the king was warned not to become haughty, certainly commoners must avoid this. Others, though, say that we know any sort of arrogance is an abomination to Hashem, and we don't need to learn it from here. What then is the message of the Jewish king being warned not to lord over his brethren?

It would seem that, indeed, having money can cause one to see himself as better than others. This is a severe mistake, since money is given to people by Hashem to achieve certain things with it. They are not wealthy because of anything they did, as the Navi tells us, (Yirmiyahu 9:22) "...let not the rich glory in his riches." Why then does the Torah speak of the Sefer Torah the king must have?

As the navi continues, (Yirmiyahu 9:23), "Only

in this can one take glory, in being focused and working to know Me, for I do kindness, justice, and charity in the world, for this is what I desire, says Hashem." If one learns Torah properly, he will understand that money is not a reason to feel he is better than anyone else. On the contrary, it obligates him to care for them and see them as important, and to be kind and guide them in serving Hashem.

While a king may be "arrogant" to a non-Jew, this is only insofar as to remind himself that he is held to a higher standard. To his fellow Jews, though, he is a servant of Hashem just as they are, and he has a role to play, as do they. Therefore, to be haughty and feel superior to his brothers is to miss the point of why he was chosen as king. That message applies to all of us, who must rule over ourselves and remember why we're here.

R' Isser Zalman Meltzer z"l, the great Rosh Yeshiva and sage, was on his way to deliver a lecture in Yeshiva when he was stopped by a beggar asking for alms. R' Isser Zalman gave him a generous amount but the fellow complained that it wasn't enough.

The rabbi gave him more, but the man still had the audacity to ask for more. Once again, R' Isser Zalman gave him another coin. The student walking with R' Isser Zalman was aghast at how the beggar treated the great man, and stunned at the sage's response.

"Why are you shocked?" asked R' Isser Zalman. "Do you think I'm better than him because I've learned a lot of Torah and I give shiurim? The circumstances of life have led me to be a Rosh Yeshiva and him to be a beggar. I do not feel superior to him so I felt obligated to grant his request, regardless of how he made it." © 2025 Rabbi J. Gewirtz & Migdal Ohr

RABBI YITZCHAK ZWEIG

Shabbat Shalom Weekly

After once again reaching a point of news and information saturation, I began to contemplate: What is the point of it all? What have I learned from all this silliness in the world?

I imagined going back in time and watching myself as a young adult. In my mind's eye I saw myself spending time obsessing over the most meaningless things; dressing fashionably, fixated on what physical items I had or desired, and being totally consumed by who the Miami Dolphins were playing that week and replaying a continuous loop of Dan Marino's latest heroics.

I yearned to yell at my 20-year-old self, "Why are you wasting precious time and mind space on such stupid and ultimately meaningless things?!"

Yet perhaps it is inevitable.

A large part of life is experiential and about learning what is important. Some things simply cannot be taught in a classroom. For instance, a person

discovers what's important in life when they lose someone close to them. Likewise, a person only understands the true value of time when they are informed that their time is limited.

With the relentless algorithms of the digital age (and all its attendant nonsense) constantly threatening to crowd out everything else in our lives, we must engage in a regular regimen of emotional and intellectual hygiene and thoroughly cleanse our minds and lives of the utterly vacuous stupidities that creep into our lives.

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle mined many of life's truths. In the very first story of his celebrated detective Sherlock Holmes (*A Study in Scarlet*, 1887), Holmes gives his friend Dr. Watson a vivid explanation of how he views the human mind. He explained that the brain is like an attic with limited space -- and one must be particularly careful what to store in it. Here we are in the 21st century and not much has changed. Save the room in your mental and emotional attic for the stuff that really matters.

We find in Proverbs (9:10), "Wisdom begins with awe of the Almighty."

This week is the start of the Hebrew month of Elul. The onset of Elul is significant as it marks the beginning of a period of spiritual preparation leading up to the high holy days of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur -- the key components of the Ten Days of Repentance. Together, the month of Elul and the Ten Days of Repentance mark a 40-day period of introspection, repentance, and seeking forgiveness. As we shall soon see, this number 40 is quite significant.

During the month of Elul Jews are to engage in a practice known as "cheshbon hanefesh -- an accounting of the soul." This involves a soul-searching reflection on one's actions and taking a hard look at the past year's deeds. It is a time to acknowledge shortcomings and seek ways to improve oneself in the three areas of relationships: 1) our relationship with the Almighty 2) our relationship with others 3) our relationship with ourselves.

Just as corporations review their financial records to understand where they stand and prepare for a financial audit, so too Jews review their actions and seek to rectify any mistakes from the prior year. This prepares us for the "audit" of the Almighty on Rosh Hashanah -- the day all of mankind is judged.

Thus, these 40 days come to represent a continual process of transformation and renewal. We focus on prior misdeeds and commit ourselves to end our self-destructive behavior and commit to spiritual growth and living a more moral existence. In many ways, these 40 days represent a rebirth of who we are and how we perceive ourselves.

Those with a basic knowledge of the Bible may recognize the number 40 as a number that represents transformation. When the world sinned to the point that

God decided that it needed to be "re-formed" the Almighty brought the flood for 40 days and 40 nights and the world was reborn.

When the Jewish people didn't trust the Almighty when He told them to enter the Land of Israel, God decreed that the entire generation would not merit entering the Land and they were relegated to the desert for the next 40 years, while that generation perished, and the nation was transformed.

There are many other examples in the Bible of the number 40 representing significant rebirth and renewal. Moses spent 40 days on Mount Sinai to receive the Torah from the Almighty. The prophet Jonah warns the wicked city of Nineveh that they had 40 days to repent before the Almighty destroys the entire city (this story is recounted in its entirety in the afternoon service on Yom Kippur). (It is, of course, no coincidence that in the Christian faith the period set aside for prayer, fasting, introspection, and seeking forgiveness known as Lent is also 40 days.)

But perhaps the most important 40 is the 40 days between the beginning of Elul and the end of Yom Kippur, which are the very same 40 days when Moses went up to Mount Sinai to plead with the Almighty to forgive the Jewish people for sinning with the Golden Calf. Moses returned to the people on the fortieth day with a second set of Ten Commandments carved in sapphire representing that God had forgiven His people. This fortieth day became Yom Kippur and forevermore the Day of Atonement.

The process of changing our lives through repentance is referred to as teshuvah. Though it is often translated as "repentance," teshuvah actually means "to return." Thus, repentance is the process of "returning" to the Almighty and it is the central theme of Elul. The belief is that during this time God is particularly close and merciful, making it an opportune moment to seek forgiveness and mend relationships. Jews reach out to family, friends, and colleagues, seeking reconciliation and offering apologies for past wrongs.

This reminds me of the following joke.

A man, who has only committed minor sins dies and God decides that while he is worthy of heaven he must still do several tasks to repent. On the first day he is asked to wash all the dishes and cutlery from the previous evening's feast. On the second day he is asked to make the beds in which all the righteous had slept the previous night. On the third day he is asked to wash and iron the garments worn by the heavenly angels.

While completing his ironing he suddenly muses, "Am I really repenting for my misdeeds, or did I just get married?"

This week's Torah portion has a similarly relevant message regarding the number 40. Here we find some of the laws related to the Jewish nation

engaging in warfare. It is important to know that according to our sages (see Maimonides Laws of Kings and Warfare Chapter 6) never in the history of the Jewish people did they ever engage in warfare without first giving their enemies an opportunity to make peace and avoid a war. In fact, Jewish warriors would never completely surround a city, rather they would only circle it from three sides in order to provide the inhabitants an escape route should they seek to flee.

Based on this week's Torah portion we see that the national army had an interesting recruitment policy:

"Any man who has built a new house and has not dedicated it let him go and return to his house [...] Any man who has planted a vineyard, and has not yet eaten of it let him also go and return to his house [...] Any man who has betrothed a wife, and has not yet married her? Let him go and return to his house [...]" (Deuteronomy 20:5-7).

According to the Talmud (Sotah 2a) 40 days prior to the formation of an embryo a heavenly voice goes out and proclaims: 1) who this person will marry 2) what home this person will settle down into and 3) what fields the person will own. In other words, as part of the creation of a child three things are pre-determined: one's spouse, one's home, and one's property (livelihood).

The 40 days of the embryo's evolution into a living being are all part of that process of who this person will eventually become. Because these three elements are so intrinsic to a person's self-definition, any warrior who had begun the process but not yet completed any one of these three elements was excused from serving in the army.

The famous Biblical commentator known as Rashi explains (ad loc) that a person who contemplates the possible inability to complete these three elemental aspects of who he is, undergoes a "torment of the soul." It is for this reason that he is excused serving.

A person cannot control many aspects of life; parentage, innate abilities and challenges, how much time one has, etc. But it is what we do with the circumstances of our lives that counts: Did we maximize our potential? Did we develop and refine our character? Have we become the kind of person that the people who are supposed to love us actually do love us?

As Carl Jung once wrote, "I am not what happened to me. I am who I choose to become." This is what the month of Elul is all about. © 2025 Rabbi Y. Zweig & shabbatshalom.org

SHLOMO KATZ

Hama'ayan

“You shall do to him as he Zamar / conspired to do to his fellow." (19:19) The Gemara (Makkot 5a) teaches that the case of Eidim zomemim / conspiring witnesses is as follows: Two men (call them

"Reuven" and "Shimon") testify that a third person ("Levi") committed a crime, borrowed money, or incurred some other liability at a certain place and time. Two other men stand up in court and say, "How can you, Reuven and Shimon, testify that you witnessed Levi commit a crime, borrow money, etc. at that place and time? At that exact time, you were with us in a different place." The second pair says nothing about Levi's liability; they merely say that Reuven and Shimon could not have witnessed Levi do the thing he is accused of. In such a case, the second pair of witnesses is presumptively believed, and Reuven and Shimon receive whatever penalty (death, lashes, paying money) they tried to impose on Levi.

In contrast, if the second pair of witnesses directly contradicts Reuven and Shimon and says, "Levi did not commit that crime, borrow that money, etc.," Reuven and Shimon are not punished. In that situation, neither pair of witnesses is believed more than the other, and the case against Levi is dismissed with no consequences to him or the witnesses.

Why, in the case of Eidim zomemim, does the Torah presumptively believe the second pair of witnesses? Rabbeinu Nissim ben Reuven Gerondi z"l (Spain; 1320-1376) explains:

It is more likely that the first pair of witnesses is lying than it is likely the second pair is, because it is more within human nature to lie about the details of something that actually happened than to make up an entire story that never happened. For example, if Reuven and Shimon know that Levi committed a murder or borrowed money, but they did not witness it, they may lie and say they witnessed it. It is less likely that the second pair of witnesses fabricated a story about being in a different city with Reuven and Shimon at that exact time if that never happened--especially given that Reuven and Shimon know the truth and can defend themselves.

R' Nissim adds: In contrast, when two witnesses contradict each other directly, we do not apply logic to decide who is more likely to be telling the truth. Even if two of the greatest scholars and Tzaddikim of the generation would testify that Levi did borrow money, and two unlearned Jews not known for their piety, but otherwise kosher witnesses, would testify that Levi did not borrow that money, we would not say that the great Tzaddikim are

presumptively telling the truth--even if one of those witnesses was Moshe Rabbeinu. Rather, the court would believe neither pair. This distinction is what the Gemara (Sanhedrin 27a) refers to when it says that the law of Eidim zomeim is a "Chiddush" / a novelty, R' Nissim writes. (Derashot Ha'Ran #11) © 2025 S. Katz & torah.org

