

Press the Switch

By Rabbi Pinchos Lipschutz

The *Gemara* in *Yevamos* (63a) quotes Rabi Elozor, who derives from the *posuk* (*Bereishis* 12:3), “*Venivrichu vecha kol mishpichos ha’adamah*,” that blessing flows to all families of the world only on account of *Am Yisroel*.

The *Gemara* also quotes Rabi Elozor bar Avina, who teaches, “*Ein puraniyos ba’ah la’olam ela bishvil Yisroel*,” everything bad that happens in the world is “*bishvil Yisroel*,” for the Jewish people. He derives this from the *posuk*, “*Omarti ach tiri osi, tikchi mussar*” (*Tzefaniah* 3:7), meaning that Hashem does these things so that we should learn *mussar* from them and do *teshuvah*.

Yet, we take a glance at the news headlines and we wonder what any of them have to do with us.

Parshas Shoftim, which we *lain* this week, begins with the commandment to appoint *shoftim*, judges, and *shotrim*, enforcers. For centuries, *darshonim* have been discussing why this *parsha* is always *lained* on the first *Shabbos* of the month of *Elul* and how those obligations refer to us.

Many have said that the *pesukim* are obligating us to judge every action that we are about to perform and ascertain whether it should be done or not. Torah Jews should never act on impulse, or out of anger, or based on some other momentary stimulation. If the action is proper, then we should undertake it, and if it is not, then no matter what justification we can come up with, we should not do it.

The *parsha* continues with the requirement to judge correctly, not to twist a judgment and not to accept bribes even when reaching the right decision, for doing so will lead to corruption and improper understanding. Though the Torah is addressing *dayonim*, as they decide on legal cases, the lesson to us regarding our own actions is quite appropriate. We must not let ourselves be led astray and become affected by things that subvert our equilibrium. “*Tzedek tzedek tirdof*.” We must always pursue what is right and just, as a people, as a community, and as individuals.

Hakol bishvil Yisroel. Let us examine what is in the news as we enter *Elul* and understand what it has to do with us. The main domestic news story relates to the FBI search through the private home of a former president, ostensibly to find documents he allegedly improperly took. Without getting involved

in the politics of it, which is quite difficult because it is all about politics, we can learn several lessons from what transpired.

We see that there are no secrets in this world, and if someone does something objectionable, it is likely that he will be discovered, and if not punished, then he'll at least be exposed and embarrassed. This is a lesson to us as we begin the period of introspection to remember that "*kol maasecha basefer nichtovim.*" Hashem knows all that you have done over the past year and during your life. We cannot hide or cover up our sins. We must face up to them, admit them, and resolve not to do them again in order to find favor on the *Yom Hadin*.

Crime rates continue spiking unabated, and we see what happens when justice is perverted, when policemen are afraid to police, and when woke prosecutors and judges twist the law. We read of what is happening in cities such as New York, Chicago, Seattle, Portland, San Francisco and Los Angeles, among others. Criminals and thugs have no fear of the law, and crime rises as police are handcuffed instead of the bad guys. These once-great cities are overrun with crime and homelessness, and businesses and law-observant residents take flight.

When we see this happening, we need to remember the teachings of *Chazal* and recognize that there are lessons for us in the headlines. Especially during *Elul*, we need to see this and know that *shoftim v'shotrim titein lecha*. People who fail to police and judge themselves face the same outcome. *Elul* is here for us to proclaim to ourselves, "*Tzedek tzedek tirdof.*" We must straighten ourselves, act properly, be good, and do good.

Of course, it goes without saying that the recent passing of leading *gedolim*, some leaving us suddenly with no prior warning or medical history, coupled with a spate of tragedies in Eretz Yisroel over the past few weeks, need to send shivers down every spine and remind us to do *teshuvah* and mend our ways.

For the past couple of months, we have turned down the flame a bit as we enjoyed the warmth and calmness of the summer season. By now, bungalow colonies have emptied, camps have closed, *yeshivos* have opened, and schools are putting in the final preparations for ushering students back into their classrooms. A giant switch has been pressed and a drastic change is underway.

Since the time of the *chet ha'Eigel*, when the Jews did *teshuvah* for their sin, *Elul* has been a month of self-improvement and *teshuvah*, empowered with the ability to allow us to become closer to Hashem.

Aveiros create a separation between us and the Creator. *Teshuvah* removes the stain of *aveiros* and provides us the ability to become closer to Hashem.

When Hashem responded positively to the pleas of Moshe Rabbeinu, *Elul* became, for all-time, a period during which our attempts to return are more readily accepted.

Therefore, *Elul* has become the period when we seek opportunities for *nitzchiyus*. We ponder our actions, words and deeds as we become aware of the approaching *Yom Hadin* and seek for ourselves sources of merit.

The *Gemara* in *Maseches Bava Basra* (78b) asks about the definition of the *posuk* which states, “*Al kein yomru hamoshlim bo’u cheshbon*” (*Bamidbor* 21:27), explaining that it means that those who rule over themselves say, “Let us make the proper calculation,” before undertaking any action.

Those who rule over their *yeitzer hora* aren’t overtaken by impulse and temptation. Rather, they consider the reward of doing a *mitzvah*, as opposed to the loss incurred by sinning. A person who lives his life in that way will not fall prey to contemptuous actions and will lead a life of value and success.

This explains the statement by the Alter of Kelm in his *sefer* (vol. 1:121) that at the root of *mussar* is *cheshbon*. It is also the basis for the teaching of the *Maharal* (*Droshas Shabbos Shuvah*) that a person who is considerate about his actions will not sin.

As with all *halachos*, to gain an understanding of the process of *teshuvah*, the first place to go is the *Rambam’s sefer Mishneh Torah*. By studying the *halachos* of *teshuvah* as clearly laid out and explained by the *Rambam*, it is possible to arrive at a deep understanding of the process, thus making it easier to repent, adding potency to the study of *mussar seforim*.

Through studying the succinct, direct words of the *Rambam*, we gain an appreciation of the weight of a *mitzvah* and the destruction caused by an *aveirah*, as well as the *cheshbonos* involved with each. It is

impossible to undertake even a cursory study of his words and not be emotionally affected and spiritually uplifted.

The *Rambam's* captivating words touch your soul and empower you to undertake to make the changes that each person needs to make. You become swept up by the beauty of his words and the clarity of his arguments of living a richer, fuller, and better life.

If, before we act, we would think about what we are doing, and whether good or bad will come from it, and for what purpose we are doing it, we would become better. If we would think before speaking, we could save ourselves lots of anguish.

We can do something that may bring momentary happiness, but when we look back at the time, energy and money we wasted pursuing a fleeting passion, we realize that had we thought about whether we were accomplishing anything, we would have spent our time in a beneficial way.

Life is a test of wills. When we resist the urgings of the *yeitzer hora* and do good, we win. But when the *yeitzer hora* is able to guide us, we lose.

The *Gemara* in *Brachos* (61b) quotes Rav Yosi Haglili, who says that the righteous are guided by their *yeitzer tov*, the wicked are ruled by their *yeitzer hora*, and *beinonim* are ruled by both.

Everybody is led by a *yeitzer*. If he is a good person, he follows his *yeitzer tov*, and if he is an evil person, then he is led by his *yeitzer hora*. *Beinonim* vary. Sometimes they follow the *yeitzer tov* and other times the *yeitzer hora*. Our actions are either good or not good. Our task is to ensure that we don't permit flawed thinking to mislead us into following the *yeitzer hora* and do things that are silly, wasteful, and wrong.

Parshas Shoftim concludes with the *halachos* of the *eglah arufah*. If a person is found dead outside of a town, the elders and judges of the town, along with the *kohanim* and *levi'im*, proclaim that they had no hand in the death of the person. They didn't see the dead man walking in their town and not offer him food and seek to care for him. They vow that they had no remote role in his death.

As part of our *teshuvah* process, when we read and study the *parsha*, we should resolve to help people who have been wronged or misjudged, people who don't get a break and are abused and mistreated. We should undertake to do what we can to give everyone at least a fair chance and help bring about a time when everyone is treated the same, whether they are rich or poor, bright or average, with *yichus* or without.

Many feel that they have been wronged by the system and that nobody cares about them. Let us be among those who work to ensure that no one feels that way. Let us ensure that Hashem cares for us as we show care and compassion for others. If we help others straighten out their situations, we can ask Hashem to help us with ours. The people we have helped become the most effective advocates for us on the *Yom Hadin*, as we request in the prayer accompanying *Kapparos* on *Erev Yom Kippur* from the *posuk* that says, "*Malach meilitz echod mini olef lehagid l'odom yoshro motzosi kofer*" (*Iyov* 33:22-23).

We have written the following story before, but it bears repeating at this juncture.

There was a Jewish merchant from China whose business brought him to Europe. Taking advantage of his trip, he went to Radin in the search of a *brocha*. He introduced himself to the *Chofetz Chaim*.

"*Fun vanet kumt ah Yid?*" asked the *Chofetz Chaim*.

"I am from China," the man told him.

"*Vos hert zach in China?*"

"It's very difficult there," said the man. "There is no proper *chinuch*. There is no *shechitah*. It is difficult to observe *Shabbos*."

"It is a *tzoras rabim*," responded the *Chofetz Chaim*. "In many countries around the globe, Jews are experiencing the same problems. I published a *sefer* for them. It's called '*Nidchei Yisroel*.' Please take some *seforim* with you and distribute them in China. The *sefer* teaches how to maintain your *Yiddishkeit* in difficult surroundings."

The *Chofetz Chaim* paused. "What else is doing in China?" he asked.

The man discussed the state of the Jews there, not sure what else to add. He told the *Chofetz Chaim* that he had been away from his country for several weeks.

"Before you left," asked the *tzaddik*, "what were people there speaking about? What were the newspapers writing about?"

He responded, "The Chinese government built a huge dam, making available a tremendous amount of land for agriculture. But the dam was built very sloppily and could not withstand the awesome power of all the water it had backed up. The dam collapsed and flooded a very large area. 100,000 people died."

The *Chofetz Chaim* was visibly shaken and became emotional.

"*Oy vey. Oy vey.* The *middas hadin* is running rampant! It reached as far as China," he said.

The man was perplexed.

"Can I ask the *rebbe* a question?" he queried. "Why is it that when I told you about the *matzav* of the Jews in China, you accepted it without much emotion, but when I told you about the Chinese people, you cried bitter tears?"

"During your European trip, were you in Warsaw?" asked the *Chofetz Chaim* of his visitor.

"Yes," the man replied.

"How many Jews live there and what percentage of the population are they?" asked the *Chofetz Chaim*.

"There are about 300,000 Jews out of a population of a little over one million," said the man.

"If a man stands on a soap box on a street corner delivering a speech in Yiddish, who is he addressing?" questioned the *Chofetz Chaim*.

“The Jews who are walking by, of course,” responded the man. “Why are you asking?”

“But you yourself said that they are but a minority in the city, correct?”

“Sure,” said the man, still confused. “But the *goyim* don’t understand Yiddish, so if someone is speaking in Yiddish, he must be addressing the Jewish passersby and not the gentiles.”

“Exactly,” replied the *Chofetz Chaim*. “The same is true with the dam that burst in China. When the water was unleashed to kill 100,000 people, that was the language of Heaven. It was a warning from Hashem. But the Chinese don’t understand ‘*Shomayim* language.’ We do. The Jews are the ones who cry out on the *Yomim Noraim*, ‘*Mi bamayim*.’ We understand that when such occurrences take place, they are meant to send us a message. But how are we, in Radin, to know about what happened? That’s why Hashem sent you here. He sent you to tell us what took place and for us to hear the Heavenly speech.”

When we read the paper and when we hear the news and things people are discussing, we need to understand that there are messages there for us. Especially during this month of *Elul*, we need to be plugged in to drawing inspiration from everything that comes our way, so that we derive the messages we need to hear to prompt us to do what we must to take advantage of this auspicious period and ensure ourselves a *kesivah vachasimah tovah*.

Amein, kein yehi ratzon.