

TorahFax: Shoftim

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Tuesday, Menachem Av 28, 5783 (Hakhel Year) August 15, 2023

This week's Parsha is the fifth Parsha in the book of Deuteronomy, Parshat Shoftim (Judges)

The Parsha begins with the commandment of appointing judges throughout the land of Israel.

"Judges and officers, you shall appoint to you in all your gates, which the L-rd your G-d gives you to your tribes; and they shall judge the people with righteous judgment. You shall not wrest judgment; you shall not respect persons; nor shall you take any bribes, for a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and perverts the words of the righteous. Justice, justice shall you pursue so that you may live and inherit the land which the L-rd your G-d gives you."

The Torah commands that upon settling in Israel, a judicial system should be established to judge according to Torah law and to resolve disputes amongst the people. At the same time, the Torah emphasizes the importance of designating officers to carry out that judgment, when necessary.

The availability of proper judgment is so important, according to the Torah, that Moshe orders to appoint judges "in all your gates" -- in every city-- so that people can easily and quickly settle their disputes.

The Torah commands the judges to be equally fair with all parties. Everyone should be treated equally, whether rich or poor, simple, or learned.

Q. The Torah is everlasting and applies to us at all times and all places. How does the commandment to appoint judges and to judge honestly apply to every Jew, even those who are not judges?

A. Our sages explain that this mitzvah applies not only to judges but to every individual, for in reality everyone has to take on the role of a judge upon themselves and make the proper decisions during a person's lifetime.

The Torah literally says, "Judges and officers you shall appoint to you." The Torah tells us that we must be our own judges. Each of us should self-judge their own actions and deeds if they are in accordance with G-d's will and whatever needs correcting should be corrected. The Torah tells us that this should be done with "righteous judgment." We should not be blinded by self-love and self-righteousness, which will distort true judgment of ourselves.

Q. Rosh Chodesh Elul begins this Wednesday night, through Thursday and Friday. Parshat Shoftim is the first Shabbat in the month of Elul. Why is this lesson important for us in the month of Elul?

A. The month of Elul is the last month of the year. It is the month in which each of us has to make a thorough accounting of all our deeds throughout the previous year. It is the final month of the year, when we should correct the mistakes we made during the year. Elul is the month of self-Judgment. The beginning of the Parsha, "Judges and officers you shall appoint to you... Justice, justice shall you pursue..." reminds us of our own responsibilities to do a self-inspection and self-judgment, to reinforce the good deeds we did, and correct whatever needs correction, during this month of Elul.

Wednesday, Menachem Av 29, 5783 (Hakel Year) August 16, 2023

One of the instructions in this week's Parsha, Shoftim, is, "Tamim Tihyeh Im Hashem El-Ohecha" – "Be Tamim with G-d your G-d" (Chapter 18, verse 13).

The word "Tamim," can be translated as "complete, whole, perfect." It can also be translated as "simple," like the third son in the Hagadah, the "Tam," which means the "simpleton." Here are various explanations for the above verse:

The famous Torah commentator, Rashi, explains it to mean "simple." He explains it as follows, "Walk with Him [G-d] simple-heartedly and look forward to what He has in store for you. Do not probe the future, but rather accept whatever happens to you simple-heartedly, then you will be with G-d."

According to Rashi, the Torah tells us, "You shall be TAMIM with G-d your G-d," - you shall be simple; you shall not question G-d. Accept everything with faith. If you act this way, explains Rashi, you will always be connected with G-d.

Others explain the verse to mean that a person should be complete, whole with G-d.

How does a person accomplish being “complete’ with G-d? The mitzvot are compared to a person’s body. The 613 mitzvot represent the 613 parts of a person’s body. When a person keeps all the mitzvot, then they are whole (Tamim). Just as a body is whole and complete only when everything functions properly, so too, keeping all the mitzvot makes a person whole and complete spiritually.

Another explanation for this verse, “Be Tamim with G-d your G-d,” is that a person should be “complete with G-d,” even when you are ONLY with G-d - even when no one sees or will ever know what you did, you should do the right things. “Be complete [even when you are only] with G-d your G-d.”

Another wonderful explanation is, “You will be complete when you are with G-d your G-d.” The Torah tells us that being connected to G-d and observing His mitzvot makes us complete and perfect.

Another explanation: There is a verse which says, “Torat Hashem Temimah” - “G-d’s Torah is complete.” Torah is called “Temimah,” and the Jewish people are instructed to be “Tamim” – connected with Torah.

A Torah is not complete if even one letter is missing. A Torah has over 300,000 letters, yet each letter affects and is affected by every other letter. One missing letter makes the entire Torah not readable!

The same is with the Jewish people. Every Jew is like a letter in the Torah, which affects everyone. Every mitzvah we perform affects not only the one who performs it, but the entire Jewish nation.

The Torah tells us, “Be complete with G-d!” Your individual actions affect everyone. Be complete – do your part, for if even one link is broken, the entire Jewish chain is incomplete. It’s an individual collective responsibility.

Thursday, Menachem Av 30, 5783 (Hakhel Year) August 17, 2023

Today is the first day of Rosh Chodesh Elul, the last month of the year 5783.

In this week’s Parsha, Shoftim, the Torah compares mankind to the tree of the field. G-d prohibits the Jewish people from cutting down fruit-bearing trees when besieging a city in time of war. The Torah declares the following reason for this prohibition, “For man is like the tree of the field”.

There are important comparisons between mankind and the tree. In order to become a healthy fruit-bearing tree, one must carefully attend to the tree when it is still very young. The most crucial time is when the tree is young and susceptible to all kinds of dangers.

The same is with people. In order that our children grow up spiritually and morally strong later in life, which is the wish of every parent, we must take extra care to give them the proper education and spiritual nourishment when they are still young. Just like a small mark on a young tree will turn into a larger scar as the tree grows, so too, even a minor negative impression on a young child can have a long lasting negative effect. Thus, one's commitment to Judaism must start at a very young age.

The great Talmudic sage Rabbi Yehoshua gave his mother the credit for his brilliant scholarly achievements. When he was still an infant, she would bring his crib to the yeshiva so that he would grow and develop in the atmosphere of Torah study.

Another lesson from the tree is the importance of being constantly "connected." A tree must always be connected to its roots. As soon as it is cut away from its source, it dies.

So too, "Man is like the tree of the field" - We too must realize that G-d is our source of life and just like the tree, it is important to be connected to Him at all times through our spiritual roots -- through our Neshama (soul), by doing mitzvot and acts of kindness.

Another important lesson, says the Lubavitcher Rebbe, is that a tree is comprised of roots, tree, and fruits. The roots, although hidden from view, serve a most important role, as through the roots the tree draws its nourishment and essential minerals which are so important for its growth and existence. Also, the roots are what hold up the tree. The stronger the roots, the more protection the tree will have from being toppled by the winds.

So too, it is with the life of a Jew. The roots represent our "Emunah" ("belief in G-d"), which must be instilled in the child at the earliest age. Just like the tree, the stronger one is rooted in his/her belief, the more they will withstand any negative winds and forces which try to tear a Jew away from G-d.

Just as the goal of a fruit bearing tree is to provide its fruit for the benefit of others, so too, it is with the Torah which represents the core of the tree. In addition to studying Torah and performing mitzvot

ourselves, we must also be "fruitful" in the sense that we must help others so they too, will benefit from the beauty of Torah and mitzvot.

Friday, Elul 1, 5783 (Hakhel Year) August 18, 2023

Today is the second day of Rosh Chodesh Elul. Shabbat we read Parshat Shoftim.

The month of Elul is the last month of the Hebrew year. During this month we prepare for the New Year.

During the month of Elul we wish each other a "Shana Tova" - a happy and healthy New Year.

Beginning today throughout the month of Elul, the Shofar is sounded each day, after the morning service (except Shabbat). The daily sounding of the Shofar is a wake-up call. It reminds us of the significance of this month.

Our sages compare the month of Elul to a businessman who, at year's end takes stock of his business situation, analyzing his accomplishments of the outgoing year and reflecting upon his mistakes and opportunities which he missed during the year. Taking stock and reflecting on past performances is essential to the continuation and success of the business.

The month of Elul serves the same purpose. During this month we prepare ourselves for the coming year by reviewing our spiritual accomplishments and the lack of them in the past year. We reflect upon our behavior and our relationship with G-d as well as with our fellow human beings.

Q. What is the historical significance of the month of Elul?

A. When the Jewish people worshipped the Golden Calf right after receiving the Torah, G-d wanted to destroy them. Moshe prayed to G-d to have mercy on His people and to forgive them. After 40 days of Moshe's prayer, G-d agreed.

He told Moshe to come up Mount Sinai again. Moshe ascended the Mountain on this day, Rosh Chodesh Elul and came down 40 days later, on Yom Kippur, with the Second Tablets and G-d's forgiveness for the Jewish people.

Ever since then, the month of Elul was designated as a month for repentance and forgiveness.

The Baal Shem Tov compares our accessibility to G-d, during this month of Elul, to a king who travels through the country to visit his citizens for one month during the year.

While the king is in his palace, it may be difficult for the average citizen to meet the king. But when the king travels through the countryside, everyone has access to him and can make any request of him.

The same is with G-d, explains the Baal Shem Tov. Other times of the year, one has to make a greater effort to penetrate the Gates of Heaven. However, during the month of Elul, G-d is easily accessible and fulfills all our requests.