



The Wonderful Connection between Parshas Shoftim and the Month of Elul

We Station Judges and Guards at Our Entryways to Prevent Us from Being Duped by the Yetzer to Perceive an Aveirah as a Mitzvah

Next Shabbas Kodosh which approaches auspiciously is the first Shabbas in the month of Elul, the month of teshuvah. Thus, it is fitting to open with the sacred words of the Bnei Yissaschar (Elul 1, 10). He draws a connection between parshas Shoftim and the month of Elul based on the opening passuk of the parsha (Devarim 16, 18): "שופטים ושוטרים תתן לך בכל שעריך אשר ה' אלקיך נותן: **judges and officers shall you place at all of your entryways which Hashem, your G-d, gives you for your tribes; and they shall judge the people with righteous judgment.** He explains the practical significance of this directive for each individual. Here is what he says:

At the beginning of Elul, we always read parshas Shoftim; for this is the beginning of the process of teshuvah and its essence. It is critical for one who performs teshuvah to place a judge and monitor at each of his gateways. His gateways are his senses which the Almighty opened for him to function in this world. They are his eyes, ears, nose, mouth, and sexual appendage. A person is obligated to use his common sense to judge accurately that these senses are being put to proper use.

An officer (policeman) is someone who (monitors and) punishes one who transgresses. In similar fashion, if a person is aware that he is looking at things that he should not or speaking things that violate Hashem's will, he must accept upon himself a fitting punishment—such as giving money to tzedakah or some form of physical deprivation such as fasting—like the students of the Ramak, z"l, did. This is an essential part of teshuvah.

Do Things that Reflect Well on Yourself

I would like to propose my own explanation regarding the connection between the mitzvah of **placing judges and officers at your entryways** and the month of Elul. Let us refer to a teaching in the Mishnah (Avos 2, 1): "כל רבי אומר, איזוהי דרך ישרה שיבור לו האדם, כל: **Rebbe says: Which is the proper path that a man should choose for himself? Whatever is a credit ("Tiferes") to himself and earns him the esteem ("Tiferes") of fellow men.** Undoubtedly, a Jew should serve Hashem by studying Torah and performing mitzvos l'shema—solely for the sake of Hashem. That being the case, why is it necessary for a person to serve Hashem by choosing a path that also **earns him the esteem of his fellow man?**

The Midrash Shmuel explains what this means in the name of the pious Rabbi Yosef Yaavetz (Jabez) based on the words of Shlomo HaMelech, the wisest of all men (Mishlei 21, 2): "כל דרך איש ישר בעיניו: **a man's every way is upright in his eyes.** In other words, every person thinks that his way is good and proper because of his own personal bias. Hence, he does not recognize his own faults or shortcomings. This is the implication of the next passuk in our parsha (Devarim 16, 19): "כי השוחד יעור עיני חכמים: **because a bribe will blind the eyes of the wise,** i.e., a person will not recognize his own poor judgment.

This then is the question posed by Rabeinu HaKadosh, Yisrael's teacher: "**Which is the proper path that a man should choose for himself?**" How can a person discern whether or not he has chosen the right path?

Perhaps he has chosen incorrectly, seeing as the yetzer blinds him to the truth and convinces him that **“a man’s every way is upright.”** Hence, Shlomo HaMelech warns us elsewhere (Mishlei 3, 5): **“ואל בניתך אל תישען”**—**and do not rely on your own understanding.**

To which Rabeinu HaKadosh provides a definitive answer: A person should choose a course of action that satisfies two criteria. Firstly, **“it should be a credit to himself.”** He should ask himself whether or not he is making the best use of the talents HKB”H has given him. Is he a credit to HKB”H and His Torah?

Secondly, since a person cannot rely solely on his own judgment, he should also ask himself if this course of action will **“earn him the esteem of his fellow man.”** In other words, he should seek the advice of someone who is a talmid-chacham and god-fearing, who is unbiased. If his choice satisfies both of these criteria, he can rest assured that he has chosen the proper path. This is the gist of the illuminating words of the Midrash Shmuel.

We can embellish this thought by focusing on the precise language employed by Rabeinu HaKadosh. He says **“ותפארת לו מן האדם”** instead of **“ותפארת לו מבני אדם”**. Thus, he is instructing us to consult with **“האדם”**—specifically with someone who is esteemed, well-versed in the Torah, and possesses **“yirah.”** Consulting with someone who lacks these qualifications is of no benefit; it will not ensure that we have chosen a proper, upright path.

This is supported by the sacred, edifying words of the Noan Elimelech (beginning of parshas Pinchas). Here is a loose translation:

There are some people, who when presented with an opportunity, are uncertain as to what to do, because they are uncertain if it is a mitzvah to do the thing. They doubt themselves, because the yetzer hara blinds a person to the truth, chalilah. Yet, when they see a particular tzaddik doing that thing, and he does so with so much “ahavah” and “yirah,” it is apparent to everyone that it is indeed a mitzvah to follow his example—even though it was initially unclear whether or not it was a mitzvah.

This then is the lesson Rabeinu HaKadosh intended to teach. The proper course of action should be **“כל שתפארת לעושיה”**—one must consider whether or not it will be to his credit based on his abilities to please HKB”H. It should also be **“ותפארת לו מן האדם”**—one should consult with a highly-regarded person, who is a tzaddik, to confirm that one is acting appropriately.

Rabeinu HaKadosh a Nitzotz of Yaakov Avinu Began the Mishnayos with Krias Shema

I had a wonderful idea that I would like to share with my royal audience. I would like to explain why Rabeinu HaKadosh suggested that these two criteria are necessary to choose a proper course of action: **“Whatever is a credit (“Tiferes”) to himself and earns him the esteem (“Tiferes”) of fellow men.** To begin with, we will introduce what the Arizal teaches us in Likutei Shas (Avos, ibid.). He explains that Rebbe, Rabeinu HaKadosh, chose to extol the virtues of the midah of **“Tiferes,”** because he was a **“nitzotz”**—a spark from the neshamah—of Yaakov Avinu whose midah was **“Tiferes.”**

Let us elaborate. Our sacred sefarim, based on the Zohar hakadosh (Terumah 176a), explain that each of the three Avos served Hashem with his own, unique midah. Avraham Avinu was the paradigm of **“midas hachessed”**; he treated all human beings with kindness, welcoming guests into his tent, in an effort to draw them closer to HKB”H. Yitzchak Avinu was the paradigm of **“midas hadin,”** also referred to as **“gevurah.”** Hence, the Torah refers to him as (Bereishis 31, 42): **“פחד יצחק”**—**the Dread of Yitzchak.** Lastly, Yaakov Avinu was the paradigm of **“midas Tiferes.”** **“Tiferes”** incorporates both Avraham’s attribute of **“chesed”** and Yitzchak’s attribute of **“din”**—although, it favors divine kindness and mercy (**“rachamim”**).

We can now better comprehend the teaching of our master, the Arizal. It was for this reason that Rabeinu HaKadosh, a **“nitzotz”** of Yaakov Avinu, the paradigm of the midah of **“Tiferes,”** chose to extol the virtues of **“Tiferes”** in this Mishnah. To choose the best way to serve Hashem, one should opt for the middle road characterized by the midah of **“Tiferes”**: **“כל שהיא תפארת לעושיה ותפארת לו מן האדם.”**

This correlates magnificently with what the divine kabbalist, the Megaleh Amukos, writes (Vayechi). He supports the teaching of the Arizal by citing the Midrash (B.R. 96, 5): "בחינו היה דר בצפורי שבע עשרה שנה, והיה קורא על עצמו ויחי יעקב בארץ מצרים י"ז שנה, וחיה יהודה בצפורי י"ז שנים." **In his lifetime, he (Rebbe) lived in Tzippori for seventeen years, and he applied to himself the passuk (Bereishis 47, 28): "Yaakov lived in the land of Mitzrayim seventeen years," while "Yehudah (Rebbe, Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi) lived in Tzippori seventeen years."** Clearly, Rebbe identified with Yaakov Avinu. Hence, as the Arizal asserts, this teaching of his alludes to the fact that he was a "nitzotz" of Yaakov Avinu. To emphasize this point, the Megaleh Amukos adds that this is alluded to by his title "רבי יהודה הנשיא", since the term נשי"א can be interpreted as an abbreviation of ג'נ'צ'וצו ש'ל י'עקב א'בינו—a **"nitzotz" of Yaakov Avinu.**

"Save me, please, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Eisav" Save Me from the Yetzer HaRa Who Disguises an Aveirah as a Mitzvah

As a loyal servant in the presence of his master, I believe we can add an interesting tidbit to the assertion of the Arizal. Upon further scrutiny, it is apparent that the advice proffered by Rabeinu HaKadosh is amazingly consistent with the approach of Yaakov Avinu. Rebbe advised us how to avoid being deceived and led astray from the proper path of action by the yetzer. Yaakov Avinu was also extremely conscious of the fact that the yetzer hara distorts the words of G-d, from good to bad and vice versa. This prompted Yaakov Avinu to pray to HKB"H (ibid. 32, 12): "הצילני—**save me, please, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Eisav; for I fear him lest he come and strike me, mother and children.** Rashi explains why Yaakov said both **"from the hand of my brother"** and **"from the hand of Eisav,"** which seems redundant. He was expressing the fact that **he was not confronting someone acting like a brother but rather Eisav HaRasha.**

In Kedushas Levi, the esteemed Rabbi of Berditchev, zy"a, and in Zikaron Zot, the esteemed Chozeh of Lublin,

zy"a, explain that Yaakov Avinu was actually praying to HKB"H to be saved from the yetzer hara—alluded to by Eisav. Outwardly, he pretends to be **"my brother,"** as if he intends to help me serve Hashem. In reality, however, he is secretly plotting to trap me in his web. Consequently, Yaakov says: **"כי ירא אנכי אותו"—for I fear him**—since it is exceedingly difficult to guard oneself against this type of yetzer—who comes deceitfully, pretending to help a person serve Hashem.

It is worth noting that this understanding comes from our most sacred and exalted sources. For instance, the Orach L'Chaim (Lech Lecha) presents in the name of the Ba'al Shem Tov an interpretation of the following Gemara (Shabbas 75a): "שוחט משום מאי—**what is the "shocheit" guilty of? Rav said it was because of dyeing.** According to Tosafos, the Gemara is referring to the **"shocheit" of the world.** The Orach L'Chaim explains that they are alluding to the yetzer hara who slaughters the entire world by enticing them to commit aveiros.

Along these lines, another Gemara teaches (Succah 52a): "לעתיד לבוא מביאו הקב"ה ליצר הרע ושוחטו"—**le'asid la'vo, HKB"H will hold the yetzer hara accountable and slaughter it.** This prompts the Gemara to inquire: **"What is the 'shocheit' (yetzer hara) guilty of?** In other words, why is the yetzer hara—the "shocheit of the world"—guilty and deserving of the death penalty le'asid la'vo? After all, wasn't it created for this purpose—to trap people and persuade them to transgress? To which Rav answers: "משום צובע". Here a play on the word "צובע" is employed. Rather than translating it as "dyeing," it is translated as "being deceitful" and portraying (coloring) something as something else; it colors the truth. In other words, HKB"H created the yetzer hara initially with a specific purpose. Its job was to tempt mankind openly to commit aveiros—not to conceal its intent or employ deceptive tactics. While this type of yetzer hara is also extremely dangerous, it is still easier for a person to guard himself and withstand a yetzer hara whose intent is overt.

Unfortunately, there is a more dangerous yetzer hara who uses ingenious tactics; hence, it is harder to withstand. It knows that if it approaches a Jew openly to tempt him to commit an aveirah, the Jew

will ward it off with disdain. Therefore, it schemes to trap the Jew in its web by disguising the aveirah as a mitzvah. It employs all sorts of persuasive arguments to convince a Jew that he is doing the right thing—that he is actually performing a mitzvah and not an aveirah. Extra caution is required to protect oneself from this type of yetzer hara, since a person might perceive it to be a yetzer tov trying to help him better serve Hashem.

Now, HKB”H created the yetzer hara to function in such a way that it would test man, but he could exercise his freedom of choice and resist committing an obvious aveirah. However, we can describe this yetzer hara as a rogue agent; it betrays HKB”H and chooses to operate in a manner that it was not authorized to operate. It deceives mankind by portraying an aveirah as a mitzvah. Therefore, HKB”H will slaughter it in the future as punishment for its treachery. In the words of Rav above, it deserves to die “משום צובע”—for coloring an aveirah to appear to be a mitzvah. As explained, it was not authorized to function in this manner.

So, it appears that this was also the inquiry of Rabeinu HaKadosh, the “nitzotz” of Yaakov Avinu. He posed the question: **“Which is the proper path that a man should choose for himself?”** In other words, how can one be sure that he isn’t being tricked by the yetzer into believing that an aveirah is actually a mitzvah? To which Rebbe answers: He should cling to the midah of **“Tiferes,”** the midah of Yaakov Avinu, to discern whether or not the act in question will be a credit to him and whether or not a tzaddik will approve of this act. In this merit, he will be spared. Just as Yaakov Avinu prayed: **“Save me, please, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Eisav”**—so, too, a Jew who follows Rebbe’s advice will be protected from the yetzer hara who pretends to be his brother to help him serve Hashem.

Rabeinu HaKadosh Began Torah She’b’al Peh with the Mitzvah of Krias Shema Instituted by Yaakov Avinu

It gives me great pleasure to apply what we have learned to explain why Rabeinu HaKadosh chose to

begin the first Mishnah in Torah she’b’al peh with the mitzvah of Krias Shema (Berachos 2a): **“מאימתי—קורין את שמע בערבין—from when is Shema recited in the evenings?”** In Pesach Einayim on the allegories in Shas (ibid.), the great Gaon Chida addresses the fact that Rabeinu HaKadosh specifically began by discussing the Krias Shema of Arvis rather than that of Shacharis. It is because he was a “nitzotz” of Yaakov Avinu who instituted tefilas Arvis.

In his sefer Ben Yehoyada (ibid.), the great Rabbi Yosef Chaim of Bavel, ztz”l, adds that the reason he specifically began Torah she’b’al peh with Krias Shema of Arvis is because Yaakov Avinu instituted the mitzvah of Krias Shema—as taught in the Midrash (B.R. 98, 3) in relation to the passuk (Bereishis 49, 2):

“הקבצו ושמעו בני יעקב. מכאן זכו ישראל לקריאת שמע. בשעה שהיה יעקב אבינו נפטר מן העולם, קרא לשנים עשר בניו, אמר להם, שמעו אל ישראל שבשמים אביכם, שמא יש בלבבכם מחלוקת על הקב”ה. אמרו לו, שמע ישראל אבינו, כשם שאין בלבך מחלוקת על הקב”ה, כך אין בלבנו מחלוקת, אלא ה’ אלקינו ה’ אחד. אף הוא פירש בשפתיו ואמר, ברוך שם כבוד מלכות לעולם ועד... הדא הוא שישיראל משכימים ומעריבים בכל יום ואומרים, שמע ישראל אבינו מומערת המכפלה, אותו דבר שציויתנו עדיין הוא נוהג בנו, ה’ אלקינו ה’ אחד.”

Based on an incident alluded to by this passuk, Yisrael were privileged to receive the mitzvah of Krias Shema. Just before Yaakov Avinu passed away, he summoned his twelve sons. He asked if any of them had a personal quarrel with HKB”H. They replied in unison, “Hear O Yisrael, our father, just as you have no quarrel with HKB”H, neither do we; rather, Hashem is our G-d, Hashem is the one and only G-d!” At that point, Yaakov Avinu also proclaimed, “Blessed is the name of His glorious kingdom for all eternity.” . . . Commemorating this event, Jews proclaim, every morning and every night, “Hear O Yisrael, our father, from the Cave of Machpeilah, that which you commanded us, we still observe: Hashem is our G-d, Hashem is the only One.”

By combining the teachings of the Gaon Chida and the Ben Yehoyada, we learn that Rabeinu HaKadosh—a “nitzotz” of Yaakov Avinu—began Torah she’b’al peh with the mitzvah of Krias Shema of Arvis, because Yaakov Avinu instituted both tefilas Arvis and

Krias Shema. It is fitting to add another pertinent fact. Regarding the forty days and nights that Moshe Rabeinu was in the heavens to receive the Torah, the Midrash Tanchum teaches (Ki Sisa 36): **How did Moshe know when it was daytime? In this manner: When HKB"''H would teach him Torah she'b'chsav, he knew that it was day; and when He would teach him orally, Mishnah and Talmud, he would know that it was night.** Therefore, Rebbe began Torah she'b'al peh, which HKB"''H taught (Moshe) at night, with the mitzvah of Krias Shema of Arvis, which is recited at night.

"Shema Yisrael": Listen to the Sages of the Torah They Will Guide You to the Right Path

I would like to present my own explanation for the reason Yaakov Avinu chose to formulate the mitzvah of Krias Shema in terms of hearing rather seeing. He foresaw via "ruach hakodesh" the inherent danger posed by the ministering angel of Eisav, the yetzer hara—that it disguises an aveirah as a mitzvah. As we learned above, this prompted him to pray: **"Save me, please, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Eisav."** Therefore, he instituted that Yisrael would accept upon themselves "ohl malchus shamayim" in terms of hearing: "שמע ישראל" --**"Hear, O Yisrael."** He wanted all future Jews to listen and heed the words of the sages of the Torah led by Rabeinu HaKadosh, his "nitzotz." Thus, they would be able to discern the proper, upright path to follow—to make HKB"''H their king and acknowledge His oneness: "ה' אלקינו ה' אחד".

This explains magnificently the Jewish custom to cover the eyes when reciting the passuk: "שמע ישראל" "ה' אלקינו ה' אחד". The source for this minhag is found in the Shulchan Aruch (O.C. 61, 5): **They customarily place their hands over their faces when reciting the first passuk so as not to look at something else that will prevent one from focusing.** In Sha'arei Teshuvah (ibid. 3), he provides the following clarification: **When the Shulchan Aruch writes "over their faces," he means over their eyes. And this is also what he (the Arizal) wrote in Pri Eitz Chaim: He should close (cover) his eyes with his right hand.**

Let us explain the matter in keeping with our current discussion. When a person relies on what he perceives with his own eyes to decide on a proper course of action, there is a significant danger that the yetzer hara will mislead him to mistakenly perceive an aveirah as a mitzvah. Therefore, we cover our eyes so as not to rely solely on our mind's eye—the perception of our intellect. Thus, when we cover our eyes, we accept upon ourselves "ohl malchus shamayim" with intense emotion and reverence based on proper hearing: "שמע ישראל ה' אלקינו ה' אחד".

We now have cause to rejoice! We have been enlightened! We can now comprehend why Rabeinu HaKadosh, the "nitzotz" of Yaakov Avinu began Torah she'b'al peh with the mitzvah of Krias Shema. He, too, just like his predecessor, feared that man would go astray following the yetzer hara that portrays an aveirah as a mitzvah and a mitzvah as an aveirah. It was precisely for this reason that he teaches us this lesson in the Mishnah: **"Rebbe says: Which is the proper path that a man should choose for himself? Whatever is a credit ("Tiferes") to himself and earns him the esteem ("Tiferes") of fellow men."**

For this same reason, he began Torah she'b'al peh as follows: "מאימתי קורין את שמע בערבית"—with the mitzvah of Krias Shema of Arvis. He wished to teach us that when a person feels confused and uncertain—like the darkness of the night—and does not know which path to choose, he should accept upon himself "ohl malchus shamayim" with the words: "שמע ישראל". In other words, he should listen to and heed the teachings of the sages of the Torah. By doing so, he will merit unifying the name of HKB"''H: "ה' אלקינו ה' אחד".

Yaakov Avinu Took the Month of Elul Away from Eisav so that Yisrael Would Be Able to Correct Everything via Teshuvah

Based on what we have learned, we will now establish the connection between this week's parsha, parshas Shoftim and the month of Elul. It is evident that the command to appoint judges and officers is intimately related to our current discussion. Undoubtedly, there is a grave concern that a person will arbitrarily

decide on his own what is proper and what is not and act accordingly. After all, **"A man's every way is upright in his eyes."** Therefore, HKB"H commanded us: **"שופטים ושוטרים תתן לך בכל שעריך אשר ה' אלקיך נותן לך לשבטיך"**—to appoint and station judges and officers to monitor us and guide us to follow the proper path. As a result, we are assured: **"ושפטו את העם משפט צדק"**—that we will follow a just path and not be led astray by the yetzer hara who portrays an aveirah as a mitzvah.

This explains beautifully the continuation of the passage. It continues with the stern warning (Devarim 16, 19): **"לא תטה משפט לא תכיר פנים ולא תקח שוחד כי השוחד יעור"** **"you shall not pervert judgment, you shall not display favoritism; and you shall not take a bribe, because bribery will blind the eyes of the wise and distort the words of the righteous."** Since the purpose of appointing judges is to teach Yisrael the ways of the Torah and to prevent them from being led astray by the yetzer that perverts their intellect to perceive an aveirah as a mitzvah. Therefore, the judges must take great care not to accept bribes. For, it is inevitable, chas v'shalom, that bribery will blind them and pervert the wheels of justice. Then, they, too, will fall prey to yetzer and distort the words of the G-d of life.

Now, to the connection between parshas Shoftim and the month of Elul, the month of teshuvah. We learn from the Bnei Yissaschar (Tamuz-Av 1, 6) in the name of the Megaleh Amukos on Vaeschanan (107), brought down in the name of the Zohar hakadosh (Yisro 78b), that Yaakov and Eisav agreed to divide up the months of the year between them. Yaakov

Avinu took as his portion for the realm of kedushah the first three months—**Nissan, Iyar, and Sivan.** The exodus from Mitzrayim took place in Nissan; they then prepared themselves during the days of the Sefirah during the month of Iyar to receive the Torah; in Sivan, they received the Torah at Har Sinai.

Correspondingly, Eisav chose the following three months as his portion—**Tamuz, Av, and Elul.** He was elated that he had control of the month of Elul, since he could prevent Yisrael from performing teshuvah prior to the Days of Judgment. However, Yaakov Avinu employed various tactics waging a spiritual war against Eisav to gain possession of the month of Elul—even though it seemed to rightfully belong to Eisav. Without a doubt, Yaakov did not do so without justification. Seeing as Yaakov succeeded in the battle, it must have been condoned from above. So, how, indeed, did Yaakov justify taking the month of Elul away from Eisav?

As mentioned, Eisav was elated when given the opportunity to prevent Yisrael from performing proper teshuvah during the month of Elul. For, when a Jew recognizes that he has sinned against his Maker, he will most certainly try to make amends and mend his relationship with his Father in Heaven. So, when the month of Elul fell to him, Eisav figured that he could prevent Yisrael from performing teshuvah by perverting their perception and convincing them that they had not sinned. Foreseeing this, Yaakov battled Eisav to gain possession of the month of Elul to enable Yisrael to perform proper, sincere teshuvah.

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