

Shoftim 5775

Today's *parashah* is crucial. It is the foundation of modern civilization, both in the US and in almost any government elected by and from its citizens. It also teaches that humility is not a weakness, and forcefulness is not strength.

A few highlights from *Shoftim* is Hashem instructing Moses to set up tiers of judges and enforcers, essentially policemen. It tells of cities where people who accidentally kill someone can flee to. It tells us to help someone with their ox if that ox falls to the side of the road. These, and many of the other laws in this *parashah* relate to the dignity of each other and our community. Whether it is disciplining a child for not obeying their parents, regardless of the efficacy of that discipline, or taking the impaled body of a capital offender down at sunset, it affords dignity in seemingly odd places.

That dignity, though, must be backed up by its leaders. My friend and colleague, Kristin Barnes, teaches in her classes on how to communicate more effectively that one must "live it to give it." She means that in order to convey your message, you must embody it. Hypocrites are eventually found out and crumble under their misleadings. Look at the Duggar family, of the famous show *19 Kids and Counting* – they preached a seemingly wholesome form of family values which, in the end was revealed to be completely hypocritical as their adult son Josh was outed as molesting underage girls when in his late teens. He, a community leader, was also recently outed as being a member of a social website dedicated to adultery.

This shouldn't be a surprise, as that very personality was a member of the Family Research Council. The Family Research Council, if you're not aware, purports to uphold strong family values based on Christian beliefs. In reality, their core mission is to defame, hurt, and denigrate gay people through their myriad policies and lobbying efforts. They are so

dedicated to this task that the Southern Poverty Law Center designated the Family Research Council as a hate group in 2010.

But this isn't about the Duggars. This is about false prophets, like in chapter 18, verse 20 of Deuteronomy. This is about our kings being of our brethren, like in chapter 17, verse 15, and that king remaining humble, as in chapter 17, verses 18, 19, and 20.

Hypocrisy and opportunism are rampant in this world. I will be the first to admit that I am guilty of them, despite my best efforts not to succumb. It is a simple fact of life that we are driven to consume, to imbibe, and to take. We validate our existence in many ways, whether it's through seeking thrills, seeking money, seeking fame, or, as I do, seeking recognition. Yes, speaking up here is a selfish act which I attempt to justify by giving inspiration and hopefully new insights. Regardless, I would be lying if I said that I did this purely to help others.

Speaking is a passion of mine. Leading people, inspiring them, and bringing joy makes me happy. Because that is my passion, people are drawn to it. Just as an enthusiastic artist will eventually find their audience given the proper exposure, a good leader, which I do not presume myself to be, will find their right team.

Kings and prophets are prime examples of leaders. They are people who can throw the entire balance of their followers into either prosperity or decay. They are people who, in a fit of anger, can ruin entire families or countries. Look at what happened with the sin of the golden calf: droves of people died because of the words of a few community leaders. Look at what happened with Pharaoh and Joseph: a country of people survived a famine because of the words of a prophet.

Shoftim, Deuteronomy chapter 17, verses 16 through 20, an

entire four verses, tell us how that king is to remain in check. He is not to acquire or seek an excess of gold and silver, not to take up too many horses, not to take up too many wives, and not to send mercenaries to Egypt to pillage their villages. Even more, he is instructed to have his own copy of our Law, our Torah, written by the Levites. Heck, many commentators in the *Midrash* say that he was to write each letter himself under Levitic supervision. This Torah was to be with him always, and he was to study it daily so as to remain humble before all.

Humility is crucial. Without true humility, the kind where you realize that others build you up more than you do, one will get lost in their own bloviated ego. You can see this, today (preferably after sundown) with certain political frontrunners.

John Oliver recently exposed glaringly enormous loopholes in IRS code for churches, where televangelists bilked vulnerable people out of millions upon millions of dollars, perfectly legally. They bought houses and jets worth millions of dollars, and those houses were not taxed because they were designated as places of worship. They convince their followers to ignore cancer treatments, to ignore mounting debt, and to ignore their families all to send more money to their church.

These televangelists are getting away with something that we all know, in our bones, is completely wrong. Our Torah, which their beliefs are supposedly eventually based upon, outrightly forbids it. Perhaps that is why we don't see Jewish televangelists – or perhaps it's just a numbers game. Regardless, this is yet one more example of a religious leader and supposed prophet turning faith into poison.

But let's look more into verse 20, in chapter 17. It reads "Thus he will not act haughtily toward his fellows or deviate from the Instruction to the right or to the left..." Act haughtily. Act.

Studies show that behavior can influence thought and attitude just as thought and attitude can influence behavior. I could delve deeply into the studies, but talking about scandals draws people in more, mostly because we're opportunistic. Regardless, one study showed that the mere act of exercising influenced people to eat better. Another showed that after people shopped at a store which specializes in organic and sustainable foods, they were measurably ruder to others as they felt they had already done their good deed for the day.

Behavior influences action.

Study influences thought.

Thought, when lead by ethics, leads to decisions. This is the core of a good leader.

I participated in a workshop dedicated to strengthening our strengths and reducing our weaknesses, to eventually be able to delegate our weaknesses to others on the team who specialize in what we don't. It's a brilliant idea, and you can build it easily into the very first line in *Shoftim*.

What we need for our leaders, whether it's the President of the US, the Prime Minister of Israel, the CEO of WalMart, the owner of Bangkok Cafe on Speedway and Tucson Boulevard, or any person who has someone look up to them is these three things: acts of humility, willingness to learn, and the proper implementation and delegation of their actions. In other words, they must live it to give it.

My prayer is that we can take what is prescribed for the kings we choose among ourselves and bring it into our own lives. That when our attitudes sink, we act until they rise again. That we study so as to better learn. That we administer so as to relieve our burden. I pray that, whatever each of us wants in our heart, we live it to give it. Shabbat shalom.

Va'etchanan 5775

Sometimes it's hard to get a bearing on why we have to do terrible things. It's hard to understand the necessity of conquering, killing, and destroying a city just for us to inhabit it. Much like Pinchas ending the plague by killing Cozbi and Zimri, Canaan needed to be wiped out for their iniquities. Their sins of sorcery and idolatry were far different than the Pagan religions of today, which exemplify kindness over harm. Their sins were of sacrificing children, of hurting others, and of sexual transgressions.

But this is not a d'var Torah of pain or even of Canaan. This is a d'var Torah of comfort and consolation, something we need after Tisha b'Av.

Last week we remembered the destruction of our Temple, and this week in the Torah we're watching Moshe look over the land his followers are about to take. He pleads with Hashem to go to the land and is continually shot down. In the end, his iniquities keep him from being eligible to enter Eretz Yisrael.

The problem is that the people love Moses. They've been following him through thick and thin; they've found communal peace through the government he set up; they've discovered levels of spirituality and connections with G-d they would not have otherwise had.

Moses was G-d's protege and deeply entwined with the development of the nation and the people Israel. Without Moshe's influence, the people would certainly devolve back into barbaric ways, so there needed to be a foundation for the government. Foundations for homes are usually poured concrete,

the foundation for Israel was also to be stone. And we see these tablets of stone come into existence here.

It is with these tablets I want to build today's words around. There are three commandments I will be talking about: the first, the third, and the tenth.

In order to establish our nation, we had to completely break away from the polytheistic religions based on their senses. The old religions centered around what they could see, touch, taste, and smell. They were religions of objects and idols, of sensations and violence, of blood and fire. We are a religion of cerebral thought, of self sacrifice, and of discipline. This is one of the many reasons our sages believed we were always meant to be weaned off of sacrifices and why our prayers now take the place of the *karbanot*.

We've taken something physical and turned it into something cerebral. Something which requires a discipline.

This is the first commandment. It is often described as a preamble or an introduction to the remainder of the laws. I feel it is not, though. It reads, in English, "I am the Lord your G-d, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, the house of bondage." That is not a preamble. It is not "I, the Lord, in order to form a more perfect nation..." it is a statement establishing Hashem as the god of Israel. That statement, which tells us who G-d is, is commanding us to acknowledge who he is.

The only reason there needs to be the second commandment, "You shall have no other gods beside me," is because he has commanded us to accept him in his eminent position.

Our acceptance of him is the reason we are such a cerebral religion, who debate and expand our knowledge. In fact, Egypt is, only today, what we call the place we were taken out of. The Hebrew is *Mitzrayim*. The name, *Mitzrayim*, comes from the word *m'tzarim*, which meant "narrow straits."

The narrow straits was both geographical, a place between land and rivers, and metaphorical, a place where we were restricted.

Accepting Hashem as G-d, as our G-d, and allowing us to shed the history of idols and sacrifices brings us to new avenues of thought and knowledge. Instead of relying on something we can see, a statue, rock, or celestial bodies, we are allowed to rely on theories, ideas, and studies. Instead of relying on objects to sustain our spirituality, we are free to explore and find it ourselves.

Moses was fundamental in this. Had Moses died in Eretz Yisrael, he would have undoubtedly been interred and we would likely have revered him as we do G-d. We would likely have resorted to iconography by worshipping *him* rather than Hashem.

Clearly we needed to sever ourselves from these past habits and, since we were to take back Canaan, we needed to clear it of people who would lead us astray, especially considering the plague from promiscuity we just overcame.

But Moses wasn't allowed to enter. As I said earlier, had he entered the Land, there was too strong a chance he would have been elevated to the status of a deity, rather than the most elevated prophet. He was not a deity, of course, and his humanity was shown many times, such as when he infamously struck the rock out of anger to draw water.

The third commandment is the prohibition on oaths. It tells us not to use G-d as a vehicle for perjury. On page 1,011 of our Etz Hayim, chapter 4, verse 21, Moses tells Israel Hashem was angry with him on the people's accord. As our *chumash* points out, this is seemingly inappropriate for a leader to do. Normally, saying that you were hurt because G-d was angry at someone else would be a violation of this commandment. It was necessary, though, as it set up his own sacrifice of himself for them. He let them know that not only was he not entering

the land with them, but that if G-d would deny his best prophet access because of the iniquities of the people, then the foundation of laws to follow had better be adhered to.

Moses wanted nothing more to enter and see his people flourish. One might say he coveted the land they were receiving and their status of fulfillment in that land. In fact, I believe, since he was human after all, that he definitely did.

What's interesting about the commandment not to covet is that it's one of the few commandments that are about thoughts, rather than actions. We're told keep the Sabbath holy, not to commit adultery, not steal, not bear false witness, not do false acts in G-d's name, but these are all actions. Coveting is highly internalized. It's intangible and often unavoidable. To be completely happy with one's lot is an extraordinarily difficult mindset to obtain.

So why is this in here? I would argue that taking action on those thoughts is what really needs to be avoided. Falling into a depression because you can't get what you desire is to be avoided. Wanton wanting, gluttonous or excessive thoughts of acquisition are what we must keep in check.

If you look at our *haftorah* this week, you'll see it's one of consolation. It is words from Isaiah telling us of how immense Hashem is. It tells us of all the good he creates, in stark contrast to the destruction we experienced last week. It tells us that we can be thoughtful, we can worship with our minds and hearts, rather than our senses and labors. It tells of all the good surrounding us that we are here to enjoy.

To covet is in our nature, it drives us as a species. But it must be checked and we must sometimes sacrifice what we want most for the greater good. As the *Shema* is in this *parashah*, with the binding of *tefillin* in chapter 6, verse 8, we can learn something. As Ashkenazim, we wrap our arm *tefillin*

inward. While performing this extraordinarily holy act of *davening* with *tefillin*, turning our hands inward towards us only tightens our bindings, bringing us closer to *Mitzrayim*. Only by opening our hands to others are we truly comforted.

We were taken out of the land of narrowness and suffering and told to flourish and thrive. We were given a set of rules to facilitate thriving and to give us focus. The sacrifice of Moses was necessary, but we can show that same generosity by living well and opening up our hands to others.

Shabbat shalom.