

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.