



Parashat Shoftim – September 3, 2022 – 7 Elul 5782

Dear TBE Family and Friends,

American society celebrates personal initiative. We place great value on actions that originate with the individual and transpire absent external onus or guidance. Indeed, we tend to see actions taken in response to outside suggestion (much less, pressure) as somewhat ingenuous.

In Judaism, this valuation is reversed. The rabbinic tradition actually places greater weight on actions undertaken in response to an external mandate. In fact, in many instances, the same action required of one class of individuals – for example, putting on *tefillin* or waiving the lulav on Sukkot, both of which were historically seen as requirements that pertained specifically to men – can be seen as transgressive when performed by those of whom these actions are *not* commanded (Note: In the Masorti/Conservative Jewish world, both these actions and many others that were once seen as gender-specific are now viewed as incumbent on adults irrespective of gender).

This suspicion of actions undertaken as a matter of personal volition is given voice differently in this week's Torah portion. Parashat Shoftim opens with the directive: "Appoint for yourself magistrates and officials ... and they shall direct you." (Deut 16:18) Here, of course, the instruction is to subjugate one's will to a mortal overseer, rather than the divine guidance that halacha (Jewish law) is thought to represent. But the underlying precept is, at some level, the same: The individual will or whim is, at some level, to be considered suspect. But why?

Rabbi David Fohrman (Aleph Beta) offer one possible explanation in his discussion of why Judaism prefers that we pray as part of a minyan (rather than in isolation). Putting aside the obvious social dimension of communal prayer as a source of support to those who come to the prayer experience in a state of doubt or grief, Rabbi Fohrman focuses on the way in which the individual pray-er's relationship to the liturgical text shifts when a person offers his or her petitions in the context of community. He quotes, for example, a stanza from the daily Amidah in which we ask God to "hear our voices" (*Shema Koleinu...*) and describes how when uttered by an individual praying in isolation this line becomes a reiteration of one's desire to see a personal petition – say for the successful completion of a business deal – be fulfilled. However, when said by a *shaliach tzibur* (prayer leader) amidst a minyan (prayer quorum), the same line becomes a plea that the community's wellbeing be ensured.

In a similar vein, the opening lines of Parashat Shoftim warn us of the dangers of pursuing other more mundane aspects of our lives in a manner uncoupled from the perspectives and needs of our fellows. The same well-intentioned activities that demonstrably advances our personal interests, may do so at a cost – at times, a hidden cost – to others, and hence it is only when our individual motivations and directions are tempered by the contrasting desires of others through the mechanisms of a centralizing authority that the greatest good for the greatest number is ensured. So, we are not just suggested but commanded to appoint and then heed the directions of a leader who can help us balance the needs of the collective.

This is a tall order in a society and an era that encourages us to view our own will and perspective as the ultimate authority, but also a powerful and humbling counter to this secular trend.

On the theme of community, I look forward to seeing many of you this evening as we convene for a communal Shabbat dinner at **5:30 pm** (by prior reservation only). Please recall that the Kabbalat Shabbat service will then begin at **7:00 pm**.

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Rachel Safman