

Parshas Shoftim, Rabbi David Mahler

I had the opportunity to spend *Pesach* a few years back with Tevi Troy. Mr. Troy worked as a senior White House aide during George W. Bush's administration and is a self-described Presidential Historian. He's also *Shomer Shabbos* and a wonderful person. His most recent book, *What Jefferson Read, Ike Watched, and Obama Tweeted: 200 Years of Popular Culture in the White House*, is fabulous. In it, he opens our eyes to the reading and study habits of some of our nation's past presidents. Some were voracious readers who consumed everything in sight while others barely read.

Parshas Shoftim contains many *mitzvot* and interestingly the theme of leadership can be seen in many of them.

There are 2 *mitzvos*, very different from each other, that share an additional common theme.

When *Bnei Yisrael* enter *Eretz Yisrael*, the Jewish people are to be ruled by a king. Though the king will have the same title as the leader of other nations, his function will actually be very different. His main responsibilities are to be the commander-in-chief of the army, foreign policy, diplomacy, taxes, maintaining order, and many others.

However, the *Rambam* also lists another responsibility of the king, one that I would never have come up with and that is likely far different among the responsibilities of any other world leader. The *Rambam* writes that the king should involve himself in *Torah* learning. The king must study *Torah* diligently. Yes, the nation rests on his shoulders, and yes, he has more to do than there are hours in the day. However, he may never neglect a core responsibility of his - daily *Torah* study. This is why the *Torah* mandates that a king write a *Sefer Torah* and carry it with him. He must always have access to *Talmud Torah*, for that is an essential part of his job description.

Imagine if the prime minister of a country was required to designate time every single day to study, research, read, learn and analyze text each day. Imagine the president saying he is unavailable for a few hours and cannot be interrupted as he sits with a study partner in the library debating ancient texts.

No matter which party he was from, he would likely be heavily criticized. People would say – “he’ll study when he’s out of office. He has a job to do now”. Yet, according to the *Rambam*, studying, growing, challenging his mind and feeding his curiosity is such a critical component of who we are, even a king, president or prime minister.

Torah study is our anchor in a world of shifting winds. *Torah* study grounds us, humbles us, calibrates our moral compasses, guides our difficult decisions and most importantly binds us with the Creator of the universe.

Torah study is not only the responsibility and privilege of the king, but it is the responsibility and the birthright of every Jew, even the one who has murdered accidentally.

Later in the *parsha*, the *Torah* reminds us of the laws of *Arei Miklat*, the cities of refuge designed to protect a person who has accidentally murdered and is fleeing for safety from the victim's vengeful family. The *Torah* tells us that if a person must seek refuge in an *Ir Miklat*, he must be supported with all necessary assistance. The *Torah* teaches that he is exiled to the city so he can “live”. What does life mean? In addition to food and drink, clothing and shelter (as well as wifi), the *Gemara* (*Makkos* 10a) teaches that the accidental murderer’s teacher must travel with him. Having a *Morah* or *Rebbe* always present to be able to learn with him/her is considered to be one of life’s basic necessities. *Torah* is the oxygen we breathe.

Once again, we see the importance of *Talmud Torah* in one’s life.

As the calendar has turned to *Elul*, the month designated to strengthening our *mitzvot*, we should try and commit ourselves to making a small improvement (large ones are permissible as well) in the area of *Talmud Torah*.

There are so many options today. With the proliferation of classes online and English translations available – we shouldn’t miss the opportunity and privilege to add a bit more *Torah* to each day.

The *Mishna* (*Shabbos 111a*) states that each Jew is a prince or princess. Learning a bit more will transform us into kings and queens.

Shabbat Shalom!