



Shoftim: Joyful Judgement

You shall set up judges and law enforcement officials for yourself in all your cities that the Lord, your God, is giving you, for your tribes, and they shall judge the people [with] righteous judgment (Devorim 16:18).

The beauty of our Torah lies in its ability to convey profound, life-enhancing messages in a nuanced and gentle manner. Moshe instructs us to set up judicial systems in each of our communities. The judges must be just, pious, and upright and dedicate themselves to upholding the rule of law. They may not give preferential treatment to one litigant over the other, and their conduct, both in and out of the court, must be beyond reproach. They must overcome their fear of the powerful and not instinctively side with the poor. Their ultimate allegiance is to God, the Torah, and the creation and preservation of a just society.

The great Chassidic master, Rav Levi Yitzchak of Berdichev (1740-1809) sees an additional spiritual and interpersonal message in this verse. During this month of Elul, we prepare for the upcoming Days of Judgement, *Yimei HaDin*. We ask God for mercy and compassion. We ask our Father to look at us through the Divine lens of *Rachamim*, *compassion*, and not through the prism of *Din*, *justice*. How do we “convince” God to make this shift? After all, if I have done something wrong, if I have committed some relationship trespass against God, what right do I have to ask for the mercy? If I have committed the “crime”, am I not deserving of the punishment?

The Rebbe explains that our actions in this world impact and inform the way God acts towards us. The Baal Shem Tov explains that God is like our shadow (*Hashem Tzilcha* –Psalms 121:5), meaning just as my shadow mimics my every move, so too God’s reaction towards me is a reflection of my actions towards others. Thus, if we want Divine compassion and mercy, we must extend those very traits and behaviors towards others. If I want God to give me the benefit of the doubt, I must extend that same courtesy to another. If I want God to see beyond my faults and shortcomings, I must strive to do this for those around me. If I want God to bestow blessing upon me, I must go out of my way to bestow upon others. If I want God to help me in difficult times, I must be ready to roll up my sleeves and help others in their time of need.

This is the meaning of the above mentioned verse. *“Shoftim V’Shotrim Titen Lecha B’chol She’arecha, you shall set up judges and law enforcement officials for yourself in your cities” - I have the ability to influence Divine judgment through the judgements I make within my own city, within my own world. “V’shaftu Es Ha’am Mishpat Tzedek, you shall judge the people righteously” - If I judge the other with compassion, if I judge the other with mercy, if I give the other the benefit of the doubt – I will bring down Divine compassion from above.*

It is during this sacred month that we must prepare ourselves to give an accounting of the past year and ask for another year in which we can accomplish and be productive. We all need a bit of Divine compassion, *Rachamim* to help us through this process. We learn from this opening verse that the best way to convince God to take care of us is to take care of one another. If we shower compassion, mercy, and love upon one another, if we are a bit less critical of one another, we will be privileged to receive a generous dose of *Rachamim* from our Father above.

Let us learn this lesson, let us live this lesson, and in its merit, may we all be inscribed in the Book of Life.