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Greatness Is Humility

There is a fascinating detail in the passage about the king in this week's parsha. The text says that "When he takes the throne of his kingdom, he must write for himself a copy of this Torah on a scroll before the levitical priests" (Deut. 17:18). He must "read it all the days of his life" so that he will be God-fearing and never break Torah law. But there is another reason also: so that he will "not begin to feel superior to his brethren" (Kaplan translation), "so that his heart be not haughty over his brothers" (Robert Alter). The king had to have humility. The highest in the land should not feel himself to be the highest in the land.

This is hugely significant in terms of the Jewish understanding of political leadership. There are other commands directed to the king. He must not accumulate horses so as not to establish trading links with Egypt. He should not have too many wives for "they will lead his heart astray." He should not accumulate wealth. These were all standing temptations to a king. As we know and as the sages pointed out, it was these three prohibitions that

Solomon, wisest of men, broke, marking the beginning of the long slow slide into corruption that marked much of the history of the monarchy in ancient Israel. It led, after his death, to the division of the kingdom.

But these were symptoms, not the cause. The cause was the feeling on the part of the king that, since he is above the people he is above the law. As the rabbis said (Sanhedrin 21b), Solomon justified his breach of these prohibitions by saying: the only reason that a king may not accumulate wives is that they will lead his heart astray, so I will marry many wives and not let my heart be led astray. And since the only reason not to have many horses is not to establish links with Egypt, I will have many horses but not do business with Egypt. In both cases he fell into the trap of which the Torah had warned. Solomon's wives did lead his heart astray (1 Kings 11:3), and his horses were imported from Egypt (1 Kings 10:28-29). The arrogance of power is its downfall. Hubris leads to nemesis.

Hence the Torah's insistence on humility, not as a mere nicety, a good thing to have, but as essential to the role. The king was to be treated with the highest honour. In Jewish law, only a king may not renounce the honour due to his role. A parent may do so, so may a rav, so may even a *nasi*, but not a king (Kiddushin 32a-b). Yet there is to be a complete contrast between the external trappings of the king and his inward emotions. Maimonides is eloquent on the subject:

Just as the Torah grants him [the king] great honour and obliges everyone to revere him, so it commands him to be lowly and empty at heart, as it says: 'My heart is empty within me' (Ps. 109:22). Nor should he treat Israel with overbearing haughtiness, for it says, "so that his heart be not haughty over his brothers" (Deut. 17:20).

He should be gracious and merciful to

the small and the great, involving himself in their good and welfare. He should protect the honour of even the humblest of men. When he speaks to the people as a community, he should speak gently, as it says, "Listen my brothers and my people...." (1 Chronicles 28:2), and similarly, "If today you will be a servant to these people..." (1 Kings 12:7).

He should always conduct himself with great humility. There was none greater than Moses, our teacher. Yet he said: "What are we? Your complaints are not against us" (Ex. 16:8). He should bear the nation's difficulties, burdens, complaints and anger as a nurse carries an infant. (Maimonides, Laws of Kings 2:6)

The model is Moses, described in the Torah as "very humble, more so than any person on the face of the earth" (Num. 12:3). "Humble" here does not mean diffident, meek, self-abasing, timid, bashful, demure or lacking in self-confidence. Moses was none of these. It means honouring others and regarding them as important, no less important than you are. It does not mean holding yourself low; it means holding other people high. It means roughly what Ben Zoma meant when he said (Avot 4:1), "Who is honoured? One who honours others." This led to one of the great rabbinic teachings, contained in the siddur and said on Motsei Shabbat:

Rabbi Jochanan said, Wherever you find the greatness of the Holy One, blessed be He, there you find His humility. This is written in the Torah, repeated in the Prophets, and stated a third time in the Writings. It is written in the Torah: "For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great, mighty and awe-inspiring God, who shows no favoritism and accepts

no bribe." Immediately afterwards it is written, "He upholds the cause of the orphan and widow, and loves the stranger, giving him food and clothing" ... (Megillah 31a)

God cares for all regardless of rank, and so must we, even a king, especially a king. Greatness is humility.

In the context of the Diamond Jubilee of Queen Elizabeth the Second, there is a story worth telling. It happened in St James Palace on 27 January 2005, the sixtieth anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz. Punctuality, said Louis XVIII of France, is the politeness of kings. Royalty arrives on time and leaves on time. So it is with the Queen, but not on this occasion. When the time came for her to leave, she stayed. And stayed. One of her attendants said he had never known her to linger so long after her scheduled departure time.

She was meeting a group of Holocaust survivors. She gave each survivor - it was a large group - her focussed, unhurried attention. She stood with each until they had finished telling their personal story. One after another, the survivors were coming to me in a kind of trance, saying, "Sixty years ago I did not know whether I would be alive tomorrow, and here I am today talking to the Queen." It brought a kind of blessed closure into deeply lacerated lives. Sixty years earlier they had been treated, in Germany, Austria, Poland, in fact in most of Europe, as subhuman, yet now the Queen was treating them as if each were a visiting Head of State. That was humility: not holding yourself low but holding others high. And where you find humility, there you find greatness.

It is a lesson for each of us. R. Shlomo of Karlin said, *Der grester yester hora is az mir fargest az mi is ein ben melekh*, "The greatest source of sin is to forget we are children of the king." We say *Avinu Malkenu*, "Our father, our king."

It follows that we are all members of a royal family and must act as if we are. And the mark of royalty is humility.

The real honour is not the honour we receive but the honour we give.



Just Justice

A healthy society must have a functioning court system; this, to paraphrase popular wisdom, is what keeps people honest. A holy society, on the other hand, requires something more: A holy society is based upon the active pursuit of justice.

The Torah describes these two spheres with two very enlightening terms: The court system is generally referred to in terms of *mishpat*, a word that connotes judgment. Society cannot be maintained without judges - and the authority vested in the system of judgment to enforce its decisions. The Torah goes to great lengths to stress that without honest judges and fair laws, brutality and chaos will create an evil society whose continued existence is not justifiable. Yet even when the basic requirements of the legal system are in place, there is no guarantee that justice, in the larger sense, will be served: Law has a very pronounced procedural element, and often adherence to legal procedure produces an unjust result. Legalities have a way of blurring truth, and a "legal truth" is whatever the law may or may not find to be true, nothing more and nothing less. Upholding the law often

causes a contravention of justice - an unfortunate but all-too-familiar scenario, even given the best intentions.

The word for justice is *tzedek*, and this word is closely related to *tzedaka*, often translated as "charity," as well as *tzadik* (or *tzadeket*)-- for lack of a better translation, a righteous person. *Tzedek* is not related to procedure; it concerns itself with results. The "righteous person" who always fails in their attempts to help, may not be all that righteous - they are merely good intentioned.

This week's Parasha is aptly called *Shoftim*, judges. Both the word and the general concept are direct derivatives of the word *mishpat*, as both the word and the concept lie at the core of the justice system. It is here that the Torah commands us to install judges, and a justice system, in our cities:

Appoint judges and officers of the law for your tribes in all your settlements that the Almighty your God is giving you, and make sure that they administer honest judgment (tzedek) for the people. Do not bend justice and do not give special consideration [to anyone]. Do not take bribes, since bribery makes the wise blind and perverts the words of the righteous. Tzedek tzedek tirdof - Pursue perfect tzedek (or, constantly and relentlessly pursue tzedek), so that you will live and occupy the land that the Almighty your God is giving you. (Dvarim 16:18-20)

The language Moshe uses in these verses is complex, nuanced, even slightly opaque, and not simply because he was waxing poetic. The juxtaposition of the roots of *mishpat* and *tzedek* conveys a strong message to the careful reader: In and of itself, the creation of a legal system does not guarantee a just outcome. Appointing judges - even honest,

upstanding judges - is not enough. We must do more than uphold the law and insure the proper functioning of the legal system: Our society must be one in which the quest for justice is both constant and uncompromising.

Judaism's quest for justice goes back to its very earliest roots, to our patriarch Avraham. His behavior both in the interpersonal and the religious spheres share the pursuit of *tzedek* as their guiding principle. Thus, Avraham gets involved in a war between four kings and five opposing kings, and **pursues** them (the word to describe Avraham's activity is the same root as the word that appears in our current parashah, *tirdof*) to a place called Dan (which means judgment). Avraham's involvement in the geopolitical machinations of the kings had one overarching purpose: the pursuit of *tzedek* (see Bereishit 14:14).

The pursuit of *tzedek* is more than just an admirable trait; it is, in fact, the bedrock of the nation that God promised would emerge from Avraham and Sarah. In fact, the pursuit of *tzedek* is part and parcel of the promise itself:

God said, 'Shall I hide from Avraham what I am going to do? Avraham is about to become a great and mighty nation, and through him all the nations of the world will be blessed. I know him for he will command his children and his household after him, and they will keep God's way, doing tzedaka and mishpat. God will then bring about for Avraham everything He promised. (Bereishit 18:19)

Avraham is informed that he and Sarah would have a son; there will be continuity, a nation will emerge that will carry forward into the world the great messages that Avraham and Sarah had worked so hard to spread. These verses offer us a rare glimpse into "God's thoughts." He tells us why Avraham was

chosen, and, by extension, why Avraham's descendants are the "Chosen People:" Avraham's dedication to kindness and acts of charity (*hesed* and *tzedaka*) is coupled with a simultaneous dedication to justice (*mishpat*) - and the combination of these elements is *tzedek* - justice. God knows that Avraham will instill these values in his descendants.

Incredibly, in the very same verse in which God reveals this decision and its motivation, Avraham displays a stunning example of his commitment to true justice - justice that combines *mishpat* and *tzedek* (and, perhaps, his commitment to *hesed* as well). Avraham hears, directly from God, that Sodom and Amorah will be eradicated because their society has become so corrupt, so wicked, that its continued existence is unjustifiable. We would do well to recall that Sodom was the antithesis of everything Avraham stood for, yet he does something that is almost unthinkable: He challenges God, and accuses Him of injustice! But it is precisely this challenge which illustrates what God already knew, and why Avraham was chosen: Rather than applauding the eradication of an evil society that was the antithesis of his own life's work, Avraham argues that this form of justice is only partial: Real justice - certainly Divine Justice, should not have "collateral damage." God must have the capacity, Avraham argued, to mete out *tzedek* for both the wicked and the righteous.

Sadly, there were not nearly as many righteous people (*tzadikim*) to be found as Avraham imagined. Apparently, this is another trait of the righteous: They do not think they are special. They believe there are many others like themselves. That is what happens when you judge people favorably. Avraham came to learn what God already knew: Sodom did not have 50 or 45, or 40 or 30 or 20 or even 10 righteous people. Avraham was unique. Had the people of Sodom been told that Avraham and his family were to be killed, we suspect that no protest would have been

raised. Business would have carried on as usual. Perhaps they may even have enjoyed a sense of satisfaction upon hearing that Avraham, and all he stood for, would no longer be a nuisance to their way of life.

God Himself attests that Avraham's uncompromising pursuit of *tzedek* will be passed on to his descendants, and in Parashat Shoftim we are commanded to bring to fruition this element of our spiritual DNA: We must create a system of courts and judges, but we must go beyond the constraints of legalism. We must nurture and develop our deep desire, our need, for justice. We must pursue justice; we must aspire to the perfect justice that Avraham saw with clarity: *Tzedek tzedek tirdof*.

For a more in-depth analysis see:
<http://arikahn.blogspot.co.il/2016/09/parashat-shoftim-essays-and-audio.html>



Every Life is Precious

A murder victim is found in a field out in the open country between two cities. There are no witnesses and no clues to the identity of his assailant. The Torah demands an exact measurement to determine the closest city. The elders of that city have to declare, "We were not derelict in our responsibilities to this traveler. Our hands did not spill this innocent blood." Then they go through a process of atonement called the *eglah arufah*, the decapitated calf.

These laws seem to be incongruously wedged in between two chapters that talk about going out to war. What is it doing there?

Rav Yaakov Yitzchak Ruderman, my *Rosh Yeshivah*, explains that the Torah is teaching us a lesson. In times of war, life becomes incredibly cheap. People are dying left and right, men, women, children, soldiers, civilians. Life somehow loses its value.

Therefore, right in the middle of the discussion of war, the Torah interrupts to present the laws of *eglah arufah*, laws that underscore the extreme preciousness of each individual life. An entire city must bring atonement for the loss of one unidentified person who may or may not have passed through unnoticed.

The *Shemen Hatov* suggests that this may be why Yaakov learned the laws of *eglah arufah* with Yosef on their last day together. Perhaps Yaakov's soul felt intuitively that Yosef would become the leader of a huge and powerful nation, that he would have the power of life and death over millions and millions of people. Therefore, it was important to teach him about *eglah arufah* to impress on him the importance of every single human life.

Rav Chaim Soloveitchik, the *rav* of Brisk, once called a special meeting in the *shul*. "My dear friends, we have a serious problem. The Czar's police have arrested a young Jewish boy."

"What did he do?" asked a congregant.

"He burned the Czar in effigy."

The man slapped his forehead in frustration.

"Regardless of what he has done," Rav Chaim continued, "the boy is in danger. We must get him out immediately. It is a question of money. Just money."

"How much money?"

Rav Chaim mentioned the sum. It was an exorbitant amount, and people gasped audibly.

"We are faced with a great *mitzvah*," said Rav Chaim. "This is true *pidyon shevuyim*, ransoming captives."

"Who is the boy?" one man wanted to know. "Is he a *yeshivah* boy?"

"No," said Rav Chaim.

"Is he a member of our *shul*? Is he someone we know?"

"No."

"Is he religious?"

"I'm afraid not. At least not yet."

One of the men threw up his hands in frustration. "How will we raise money for a boy like that? And such a large sum!"

"I don't know," Reb Chaim said, "but somehow it must be done. I am not coming to *shul* on Yom Kippur until the money is collected."

Time passed, and only a small amount of money was raised.

Yom Kippur came. It was time for *Kol Nidrei*, and Rav Chaim still had not come to *shul*. The elders of the community went to his house.

"I told you," he said. "I am not coming until you raise the money. It doesn't matter if the boy is religious or not. A Jewish soul is a Jewish soul!"

The community raised the money to ransom the boy.

Every life is precious.



Emotional Alignment

Greetings from the holy city of Jerusalem!

The beginning of Parshat Shoftim cautions the judges of the Jewish people, "Do not take a bribe (*shochad*)" (Deut. 16:19). The Talmud (Ketuvot 105b) asks, "What is *shochad*? It means *SHE'HU CHAD* (that he is alone)."

The commentator Gan Raveh explains this cryptic remark in light of another Talmudic passage (Shabbat 10a) that states, "Any judge who issues a true verdict is considered to be a partner with God in Creation." In other words, a judge who accepts a bribe cannot issue a true verdict, since the bribe will have swayed his perception of truth. Since his ruling will not be just, he can no longer be called God's partner in Creation. Therefore, the bribe (*shochad*) has led him to a state where he is alone (*she'hu chad*).

The Talmud (Ketuvot 105a) wonders what new idea we learn from the verse, "Do not take a bribe." If the phrase is trying to teach us not to acquit the guilty and accuse the innocent, this idea is stated explicitly elsewhere, "You shall not pervert judgment" (Deut. 16:19). Rather, the Talmud explains that a judge must not take a bribe even if it is in order to acquit the innocent and accuse the guilty. Accepting a bribe is wrong even if the verdict issued is ultimately correct!

This raises a problem. Earlier, it seemed that *shochad* led to the corruption of justice, which distanced the dishonest judge from God. Now

it seems that *shochad* applies even if the judge issues a true verdict. How, then, can we say that he is considered to be *chad* (alone)? Ultimately, he did what was right!

In order to resolve this difficulty, we must return to the Talmudic statement we mentioned initially: "Any judge who issues a true verdict (*emet l'amito*) is considered to be a partner with God in Creation." The commentator Divrei Chanoch wonders why the double expression *emet l'amito* (literally, "truthful truth") is used here, when the single word *emet* (truth) would seem to suffice. Once absolute truth has been reached, what could possibly make it truer?

Truthful Truth

The Divrei Chanoch explains, based on the Beit Yosef (Choshen Mishpat 1:2), that even if the final ruling is true, a judge who accepts a bribe will still favor one party more than the other. This is a corruption, since the judge loves the party that gave him the bribe and hates the party that didn't. Although the ruling itself may be *emet*, the judge's emotions have been altered, so the verdict cannot be *emet l'amito*. "Truthful truth" refers to the internal world as well, not merely an externally correct judgment.

The Divrei Chanoch therefore explains why a judge who accepts a bribe, yet issues a true verdict, is nevertheless considered to be "alone." In order to be a partner with God in Creation, a judge must be truthful through and through. Actions alone are insufficient; his emotions must also reflect his utter commitment to justice. We can learn from here that it is not enough just to act properly. We are expected to feel the right way, as well - to align our emotions with the will of God.

According to the commentator Torat Avot, there are two levels of truth. The first level is intellectual, based on knowledge and reasoning. The second, higher level is

emotional, drawn from the wisdom of the heart. This does not in any way dismiss the value of intellectual knowledge. However, it is crucial for the Torah learning that we acquire intellectually, to permeate our hearts emotionally. Torah study often changes the way we think - but we must be sure that it also changes the way we *feel*.

May we all merit to reach inward and live a truly truthful life, by allowing Torah to penetrate our hearts and change our feelings. In this way, may we live up to the high standards of behavior that have been set for us, so that God will judge us favorably!