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Knowing Your Right from Your Left

Ethics of the Fathers begins by summarizing Judaism's educational philosophy with the statement: "Stand up many students." The mishnah does not say "teach" or "inspire"; it says "stand up," emphasizing that our primary goal in educating our students and our children is to make them independent. Our role as parents and teachers is to raise young people who can think for themselves.

The Sages tell us that Rabbah, when testing Abaya, would purposely impart something incorrect or illogical to ensure he did not just accept what he taught him without first critically examining it. (Brachos, 33b)

If we do not think for ourselves, we will remain a passive blank slate conditioned by society, and our values and convictions will be a mere accident of birth. Using our mind to assess and think critically is an essential part of individuation. It is the engine that creates the true, unique self.

Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Shapira, the Piaseczna Rebbe, who perished in the Holocaust, described it this way in his personal diary, *To Heal the Soul*: "There must be a person who can stand by himself, who can decide what he wants for himself. But if there is no such person, just a crowd, there can be no free choice or personal will. Because who will choose, if besides the herd there is no one there at all?"

"Are you a person who can stand by himself, or are you just a member of the human species? Man cannot remain imprisoned by social rules, cultural customs, or accepted thought without the ability to see beyond them; he must have a mind of his own. Without this, not only is he not a Jew, he is not even a person."

Yet this week's Torah portion seems to contradict the value of being an independent thinker. The verse says, "According to the teaching that they will teach you and according to the judgment that they will say to you, shall you do; you shall not deviate from the word that they will tell you, right or left" (*Devarim* 17:11).

Rashi, citing Sifri, (17:24) explains, "Even if this judge tells you that right is left, and that left is right. How much more so, if he tells you that right is right, and left is left!" Chazal seem to be instructing us to ignore our own opinion and accept the viewpoint of the rav, even if it seems completely illogical. What happened to the importance of thinking independently?

To complicate matters, the Talmud (*Horiyos* 2b) discusses a case where an individual sage is expected to oppose what he considers a mistaken ruling of the Sanhedrin HaGadol (the Supreme Court) and stay resolute in his viewpoint. The case involves a piece of *chelev*, forbidden fat, that the Sanhedrin HaGadol mistakes for *shuman*, permissible fat. If a member of that very Sanhedrin eats the fat, knowing that his colleagues ruled incorrectly,

he is obligated to bring a sacrifice for inadvertently transgressing by eating the non-kosher fat.

The question is, why is his action viewed as inadvertent, when he knew he was eating non-kosher fat?

The Talmud answers that it is because he erroneously thought that the obligation of "According to the teaching that they will teach you... shall you do" applies even in such a case. It does not. The individual sage who recognizes that the Sanhedrin HaGadol is making a mistake is required to stick to his guns and not follow their ruling.

This Talmud seems to be at odds with the statement of the Sages on our Torah portion concerning the obligation to obey our leaders even if they tell us "that right is left, and that left is right." How do we reconcile these two sources?

Fact vs. Judgment

The resolution lies in the different nature of the rulings involved.

Our parashah is referring to decisions based on a judgment call or *sevara*. In cases that require logical deliberation and reasoning, we need to defer to our sages, who are far more educated in these matters and whose perspective and judgment are far more aligned with Torah than ours. This is hinted to by the fact that Chazal illustrate the need to accept their ruling with the example of calling your right hand your left hand and vice versa, because whether something is on the right or on the left is really a question of perspective.

In contrast, the Talmud's case involving the kosher and non-kosher fat is a matter of determining objective fact. In such a situation, we can know the facts even though we are educated than our sages. Therefore, we are obligated to stick to what we know, even if it

contradicts the opinion of our rabbi.¹

My rosh yeshiva in Yeshivas Chaim Berlin, Rav Yitzchak Hutner, was reluctant to answer a student's question unless the student offered his own approach first. Rav Hutner was instilling a powerful lesson about the importance of developing intellectual independence. He trained his students to first put in the hard work to think through the issue and arrive at their own conclusions. Only then would he impart his precious words of Torah. I embraced this approach with my own students, as well.

You are responsible to have a *dei'ah*, an educated opinion, and you also need to have the humility to defer to those whose understanding is far greater than yours. However, subjugating your opinion does not mean you do not have a viewpoint. It means you are choosing to be subservient because you recognize that you are not an expert in this area and that your perspective is not nearly as pure and Torah-based as the nuanced opinion of a *talmid chacham*, a Torah scholar.

Striking this balance ensures that there is leadership, that there is proper deference for Torah scholars, and that each individual is encouraged to develop his independence and uniqueness.

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Kesubos 57a, Rashi s.v. Ha ka mashma lan, where he explains that in disputes that involve reasoning we can apply the maxim, "These and those are the words of the living God," meaning that both viewpoints express the truth even though they conflict, since different logical arguments may be appropriate at different times. But in matters of fact, in a dispute one side must be wrong. See also the Be'er Sheva on Horiyos 2b, who gives a similar answer.



A Message from Your Soul

I recently experienced an aha moment at the airport. Having just returned from overseas, I passed through yet another metal detector. And then...it happened: I set off an alarm and was politely escorted aside. After a discreet but thorough body scan, I was good to go. But this brief inconvenience taught me a lasting lesson. My understanding of the Torah's statement "Judges and officers you should appoint for yourself in all of your gates"²³⁹ was enriched by this palpable experience. I could now understand a parallel, corresponding teaching.

The verse in this week's Torah portion contains various aspects and has inspired many interpretations. It speaks of establishing judicial systems throughout the Land of Israel. These judges must be knowledgeable of the Torah's laws and living by them. A praiseworthy achievement at that time, it's even more so in ours.

My aha moment related to another aspect of this verse, pertaining to personal and spiritual growth. We each possess "entry points" through which impressions of the world around us are received. Our eyes and ears take in continuous stimuli and information. Things enter and exit through the mouth. We can learn a lesson from airport security; we need to be proactive and aware of whatever might cause spiritual harm. While the TSA is concerned with threats of physical harm, we

must also be vigilant regarding threats of spiritual harm. The Torah instructs us to always be on guard against negative influences and harmful influencers. This includes threats to our physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual well-being. But why? Because God created human beings with greater spiritual potential than other creations. Our Creator is aware of our vulnerabilities. God has given us personal filters through which we take in the world around us and express ideas out into the world. However, left unattended, there's always potential harm that we may inflict upon ourselves and those around us.

Regardless of whether it's intentional or not, the results can be the same. How many of us safeguard our computers from contracting a harmful virus, yet aren't concerned about our own spiritual contamination? Just as we protect our valued technological devices, it's essential to safeguard the very essence of our beings—the powerful, life-sustaining inner core: the soul. We're charged to be the soul's gatekeepers. What does this mean?

The first verse in *Parashas Shoftim* instructs us: "Judges and officers you should appoint for yourself in all of your gates."

The term "gates" alludes to the gates of the body—the eyes, ears, nose, mouth, etc. This verse teaches us that a person should place "judges" and "police" over all his bodily gates to ensure that only positive and kosher influences enter his body.²⁴¹

These "gates" represent those bodily organs that form an interface between a person and his environment. "You should appoint judges...in your gates" means that the senses [one's "gates"] should be controlled by judgment from the Godly soul.

Just as a city gate is used for entry and exit, likewise ideas and influences enter into people's minds via the eyes, ears, and mouth.

Every country has police to patrol and protect its cities. Likewise, every person is like a small city unto him or herself. The *Tanya* refers to the body as a "small city." Our thoughts, speech, and actions serve as outlets and means of expression for the soul. They are the soul's "garments." What we think about, where we place our focus in life, and what we derive pleasure from affect who we are and who we become. Directing one's focus to spiritual matters refines the soul, allowing it to be aligned with the Divine.

The opposite is true with exposure to coarse, vulgar stimuli. In time, one's perceptions become desensitized. The unwholesome no longer repels or disgusts us, and the holy no longer excites or inspires us.

Our consciousness of God's Presence in our lives becomes gradually diminished. Allowing your eyes and ears exposure to that which diminishes and degrades you spiritually is self-sabotaging. Let's increase our efforts to safeguard our most valuable, life-sustaining possession: the soul. Imagine what your soul may be trying to tell you. Perhaps this could be the message:

Hello [your name]. This is your soul. I've been trying to get in touch with you, but you haven't responded to my messages. Yes, I realize how busy you are, so this won't take long. But please shut off your phone, so it's just you and me. Thanks.

Basically, you're a good person. You haven't murdered anyone or stolen anything. But is that enough of a reason to be proud of yourself? We aren't living up to our potential to strive for and reach elevated spiritual

heights. We've got what it takes to accomplish more. Let's work together as a team. We must involve our eyes, ears, and mouth equally on this team initiative. Let's communicate throughout the day to coordinate our group efforts. I'll be sending you daily briefings, but you need to stay in touch with me as well.

By the way, it's come to my attention that your mouth isn't feeling valued. You've been using it to gossip about others. Don't make excuses; just come clean and take responsibility.

Now you know why I've been trying to reach you. We both realize that you're much better than this—aren't you? Use your gift of speech positively. I'm simply asking you for better quality communication. You expect that from your smartphone, and I expect the same from you.

Once again, this is your soul calling you. Please get in touch with me.

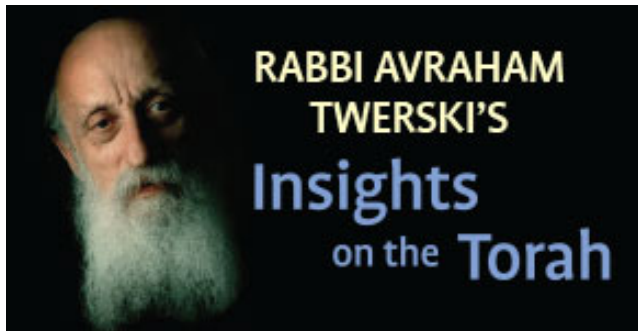
Yes, we are provided daily messages and opportunities to align ourselves with God's higher expectations. We make a choice every moment— to move closer toward or further away from becoming our best selves.

That airport experience was an eye-opener. It helped me appreciate the importance of checkpoints and the need to create my own gatekeepers. Now I'm trying to be mindful that my eyes, ears, and speech are the means through which my soul and I interact with the world. The more that I internalize this realization, the greater is my desire to be part of the team effort. So, I'll strive to be more aware of what I allow to enter my inner

world—my “small city.” And, because I value myself and others, I’ll be cognizant that what exits my mouth positively expresses who I am and strive to be, because...that is my “sole” purpose.

Making It Relevant

1. Keep in contact with your soul and make the effort to internalize its messages.
2. Listen attentively to words of Torah and wisdom, but close your ears to gossip and negative, harmful speech.
3. Use your sight to admire the beauty in the world and not to envy others’ possessions.
4. Train yourself to speak kind, encouraging, and constructive words.



Appointing a King

When you come to the Land that God gives you... and you will say, “I will set a king over myself”...; You shall surely set a king over yourself (Deut. 17:14-15).

Inasmuch as appointing a king is a mitzvah, why did Samuel rebuke the Israelites sharply when they requested a king (I Samuel 8:5)?

The commentaries have given a number of answers to this question. Perhaps the most satisfying is that of the Klei Yakar, who directs

our attention to a subtle nuance in the verses of Deuteronomy and Samuel.

It is a mitzvah to appoint a king when the intention is, “I will set a king over myself,” i.e., when one is willing to subordinate oneself to the king's rule and accept his authority. Close attention to the request of the Israelites of the Prophet Samuel show that they requested, “Give unto us a king,” not a king over us whom we will obey, but rather a king unto us who will cater to our wishes. It was this request that angered the prophet.

A term frequently used to refer to a rabbi is “spiritual leader.” Alas! Not infrequently, the rabbi is a spiritual follower rather than leader.

Rabbi Yisroel of Salant commented on the Talmud that describes the sorry state of affairs that will prevail before the Ultimate Redemption, among them, “the face, i.e., the leaders, of the generation will be similar to dogs” (Sanhedrin 97a). He said that a dog often runs ahead of its master, but then looks back to see whether the master has turned the corner. If he sees that the master has veered off in another direction, he runs back to follow him.

“That is how the leaders will be before the Ultimate Redemption,” Rabbi Yisroel said. “They may give the appearance of leading the community, but like a dog watching its master, they turn around to see which way the community is heading, and they follow them.”

We must accept authentic leadership and defer to authority, rather than expect the leaders to follow us.



A True King Changes the Diapers

"Power corrupts. Absolute power corrupts absolutely." - Lord Acton

How do you keep a leader with absolute power — a king — from becoming corrupt? In this week's Torah portion, the Torah gives us its solution:

"And it shall be that when [the king] sits on the throne of his kingdom, he shall write for himself two copies of this Torah in a scroll... It shall be with him and he shall read from it all the days of his life, so that he will learn to fear Hashem, his God, to observe all the words of this Torah and these decrees, to perform them, so that his heart does not become haughty over his brothers and he does not turn from the commandment right or left, so that he will prolong years over his kingdom, he and his sons amid Israel." (Deut. 17:18-20)

The Torah commands the king to write two Torah scrolls and carry one with him constantly—from his throne to the battlefield to public addresses. By reading from his Torah each day, he learns to "fear God," recognizing that a Supreme Being stands above him, that his kingship can vanish instantly, and that he'll answer for his actions in this life and the next. Could there be a more perfect medicine to

prevent the corrupting influence of absolute power?

We can all appreciate the wisdom of this commandment, but if we look a little deeper, we'll see another fascinating detail of this mitzvah. According to the verse, the king must personally write two Torah scrolls. Why two scrolls?

According to the Talmud¹, one travels with him everywhere while the other remains locked in his treasury. We understand the value of portable Torah guidance, but why invest equal energy in a scroll destined for storage?

The Double Life Dilemma

To understand why the king needs two scrolls, we must first examine how leadership typically unfolds in our world today. Too often, we see the greatest public figures living double lives. Even when these leaders achieved extraordinary external impact, they often failed to master their inner worlds.

Society often excuses these private lapses, focusing instead on public heroism and leadership. But Jewish wisdom takes a radically different approach.

Leading on Every Level

The Torah's vision of leadership rejects any separation between public achievement and private character. The Talmudic sage Rabban Gamliel refused to let anyone into his academy who wasn't "*tocho c'boro*"—whose insides did not match their outsides.² This same Rabban Gamliel taught, "Do not judge your fellow until you reach his place" (Ethics of Our Fathers 2:4). The Meiri, a classic 13th-century commentator, explains this teaching: one cannot judge a person by their actions out in the world. One must go to where that person lives and see their private life in order to judge their true character.

The Kuzari presents perhaps the most striking definition of authentic leadership. When asked to define a saintly person, the Rabbi responds: "A saintly person is one who is concerned with his country... He leads them justly, does not oppress any one of them." When challenged—"I asked you about a saintly person, not a leader!"—the Rabbi replies: "The saintly person is a leader. All of his senses and attributes—both spiritual and physical—submit themselves to his command... He has shown that he is fit to govern—that were he to rule over a country, he would preside over it justly just as he has done with his own body and soul."³

A clear hierarchy emerges from these sources: before one can lead others, one must first master oneself and one's home. This reflects Judaism's approach to leadership, which operates through three expanding circles of mastery:

Level 1: Internal Leadership - In *Ethics of Our Fathers* (4:1), Ben Zoma teaches, "Who is mighty? He who subdues his inclinations." Only through self-control against life's many temptations can one embark on the path to true leadership.

Level 2: Familial Leadership - Rabbi Chaim Vital taught that 99% of a person's judgment in mitzvot between man and fellow man comes from relationships at home.⁴ All the charity, heroism, and world-changing impact someone makes in their lifetime adds up to only 1%. The small daily acts of love and care given to spouse and family account for 99%.

Level 3: External Leadership - Once you've mastered yourself and built a stable home, you might be ready to expand your concentric circles to

include community, nation, and world. At each stage of expansion, the individual must never be forgotten in favor of the collective, for the collective consists of individuals.

Now that we understand the Torah's vision for leadership, we can solve the mystery of the two Torah scrolls. One scroll accompanies him as an ever-present reminder of his role as God's trusted servant in leading the Jewish people. The second remains locked in his personal treasury, reminding him of the equal—if not greater—importance of self-mastery and proper conduct within his home. The treasury scroll embodies the Torah's most radical leadership principle: private character matters more than public achievement.

A Vision of Dual-Scroll Leadership

Rabbi Moshe Shapira, one of the greatest teachers of the last generation, exemplified this dual-scroll wisdom. He taught over 35 classes and mentored over 1,000 future rabbis each week, wielding influence across the Jewish world. Yet he never lost sight of individual dignity, as the following story demonstrates: During one neighborhood mediation, when the cleaning lady offered him tea, he politely declined and continued working. Hours later, after helping settle the dispute, he walked down two flights of stairs to where his student was waiting with the car. As he was about to get in, he suddenly exclaimed, "I forgot something!" Before his student could reply, he rushed back upstairs, searching room by room until he found the cleaning lady. He smiled, wished her a cordial goodbye and left.

The same Rabbi Moshe who shaped thousands of future leaders also cared for one forgotten woman, sustained a 60-year marriage and, according to all who knew him, exercised complete control over himself in every

movement and word.

Changing the Diapers

Two takeaways emerge from the Torah's dual-scroll vision of leadership. First, like the king's public scroll, if you've been granted any leadership position—as CEO, president, father, or mother—take a moment at the start of your week to remind yourself of your dependence on God for your life, abilities, and power. Second, like the king's treasury scroll, assess whether you've given enough attention to the less glamorous moments of your life—the ones that don't earn fame and success yet form the backbone of true Jewish leadership.

Just as the king needed both scrolls to lead properly, we need both dimensions of leadership. The public scroll reminds us to use our leadership to serve something higher than ourselves. The treasury scroll asks: Metaphorically, have you been changing the diapers?

May we be blessed to bring these essential lessons of leadership into our careers, communities, homes, and beyond!

Shabbat Shalom!
Avraham

1. Sanhedrin 21B
2. Berachos 28A
3. Kuzari 3:3-5
4. כתב ר חיים ויטל: וכמעט שאין שום מקום ואפשרות אחרת, שיוכל האדם כל כך לתקן מדותיו ולהשלים עצמו, (אלא) על ידי ביתו והתנהגותו שם. ולכל אחד ואחד מזמן השם יתברך את האשה הראייה והמתאימה לו, להשלים את עצמו". (תחילת שערי קדושה)