



Parshat Shoftim

For the week ending 2 Elul 5759
13 & 14 August 1999

Overview

Moshe tells *Bnei Yisrael* to appoint judges and officers in their cities. A bribe of even an insignificant sum is forbidden. Trees are not to be planted near Hashem's altar, as was the way of idolaters. Blemishes in animals designated for offerings and other points of disqualification are listed. The Great Sanhedrin is to make binding decisions on new situations according to Torah criteria to prevent the fragmentation of the Torah. A very learned scholar who refuses to accept the Halachic decisions of the Sanhedrin incurs the death penalty. A Jewish king may only have possessions and symbols of power commensurate with the honor of his office, but not for self-aggrandizement. He is to write for himself two *sifrei Torah*, one to be kept with him wherever he goes, so that he doesn't become haughty. Neither the *kohanim* nor the *levi'im* are to inherit land in the Land of Israel, rather they are to be supported by the community by a system of tithes. All divination is prohibited. Hashem promises the Jewish People that He will send them prophets to guide them, and Moshe explains how a genuine prophet may be distinguished from a false one. Cities of refuge are to be provided for someone who kills accidentally, in order to escape the blood-avenger from the family of the deceased. However, someone who kills with malice is to be handed over to the blood-avenger who may exact his revenge. Moshe cautions *Bnei Yisrael* not to move boundary markers to increase their property. Two witnesses who conspire to "frame" a third party are to be punished with that same punishment that they conspired to bring upon the innocent party. A *kohen* is to be anointed specifically for when Israel goes to war, to instill trust in Hashem. Amongst those who are disqualified from going to war is anyone who has built a new house but not lived in it yet, or anyone who is fearful or fainthearted. An enemy must be given the chance to make peace, but if they refuse, all the males are to be killed. Fruit trees are to be preserved and not cut down during the siege. If a corpse is found between cities, the elders of the nearest city must take a heifer, slaughter it, and wash their hands over it, saying that they are not guilty of the death.

Insights

SEEING AND SEEMING

"Righteousness, righteousness, shall you pursue." (16:20)

Things seen are not always the way things seem. Oliver Cromwell had a large wart on his face. Lucky for him there was no television in the seventeenth century or he probably never would have become the first non-royal ruler of England. Nowadays he would have required extensive plastic surgery to even think about competing in the primaries.

They say that the two basic requirements of a good television newscaster are "teeth and hair." Politics has become a soap opera, and the actors in this real life sitcom have to look like movie stars. Television has reduced real life to soap opera. How people look is at least as important as who and what they are.

The Torah cautions us in this week's *parsha* that the sole qualification for choosing a judge is his righteousness: "*Righteousness, righteousness, shall you pursue.*" Even if he doesn't have wealth and presence — attributes befitting a judge — yet, if he is the most righteous person you can find, choose him despite what he lacks in those other areas.

It is for this reason that the Torah juxtaposes the command to appoint righteous judges with a seemingly non-sequitur: "*You shall not plant for yourself...any tree near the altar of Hashem... And you shall not erect for yourselves a pillar, which Hashem, your G-d, hates. You shall not slaughter for Hashem, your G-d, an ox or a lamb or a kid-goat in which there is a blemish...*" What do these three things have in common with the appointment of righteous judges?

Using mere physical eyes, one would think that a beautiful tree growing near the altar would lend a sense of grace and majesty to the service of G-d. Seeing is not always the way things seem. The Torah with its spiritual "eyes" tells us that a tree planted near the altar is revolting to G-d. Why? A tree symbolizes growth. A

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fatal idolatrous misconception is that G-d "grows" by Man's service of Him. Judaism says that the actions of Man can neither add to nor subtract from the Infinite One.

We see this idea expressed in the engraving of the Ten Commandments. Why were they engraved on stone? Why not on wood? Stone doesn't change. It doesn't grow. The Holy Ark, on the other hand, had a wooden core. The Ark symbolizes Man. The tablets of the Torah, the unchanging Will of G-d, find their home in the Ark — the heart of Man. When Man places the Torah in his heart, he grows. His spiritual core expands and develops like a tree. G-d, however, is, was, and will be. He is existence. We cannot add to Him in any way.

What is despicable about a pillar? Drive along the main boulevard of any capital and you'll see any number of statues. Soldiers on massive stone horses, foreleg raised, forever about to canter. Frozen in a remembrance of things past. A pillar, a monument, always relates to things that were. A Jew relates to G-d not just as He who created everything, but as the G-d who continues to create existence every nano-second. The Jew's

relationship with G-d is not just to build Him monuments for the past, as if to say "G-d — You did a great job. See ya." The Jew recognizes that since G-d created us, He created us with and for a purpose. Therefore we are obliged to fulfill that purpose. It's an ongoing relationship.

The third abomination is an offering with a blemish.

Most of us believe there's a G-d. But when it comes to serving Him wholeheartedly, with all our heart and soul, we would rather think like the ancient Greeks — that He made the world and went off to play golf; that He's not interested in what we do. A blemish in an offering symbolizes that our service of G-d is lacking total commitment. It means we want a junior partnership with the Boss. It's like saying "Look G-d, I know you rule the world and everything, but let me have a little space to run my own show over here." A Jew serves G-d on a full-time twenty-four-hour-a-day basis. We never close.

Sources: Sforno, Meshech Chochma, Rabbi Shimshon Rafael Hirsch, Rabbi Mordechai Perlmán

Haftarah: Isaiah 51:12-52:12

This Haftarah is the fourth in the series of the "Seven Haftarahs of Consolation." In this prophetic view, Yeshaya alternates between visions of the future redemption and the dark past, warning the Jewish nation against repeating past mistakes.

Why, says G-d, must you fear your mortal oppressors who are destined to die and become dust? Where now are those great nations which sought to oppress you? If you will only keep my Torah then I will protect you and declare you to be My people.