

THAT PRESCIENT MOMENT OF PAUSE...

by Rabbi Label Lam

Judges and officers you should place for yourself in all your gates... (Devarim 17:18)

On the most basic level we learn here of the practical importance of each community setting up courts of law and a system of enforcement. Something else, closer to home, may be implied here, though. We see a similar expression is used for the commandment to place a mezuzah - a mini-Torah Scroll, "on the door posts of your house and upon "your gates". Conceptually linked, these two verses may yield together a potent point of equal practicality.

Eleven years ago we were spending Shabbos at the house of a truly great person. The Rabbi asked my oldest who was in first grade at the time son what he was learning in school. Moments later they were sitting together with open books. It was fascinating to see people on two different levels confronting the same text.

When they got to the place where the verse states, (Breishis 4:7) "Sin squats at the door..." my son translated and the Rebbe asked him, "Which door?" My son responded innocently, "I don't know!" The Rebbe then said something that struck me as amazing. He said, "Any door, any opening where he can enter!"

There are many avenues of access for destructive forces to enter a person's life. We have five senses and many memories too. They often work in tandem to upset our equilibrium. All it takes is a smell or the music of a passing car and we are someplace we would rather not be. Sometimes the opening is a moment of weakness, being tired or even overly exuberant. Occasionally the chink in the armor is exposed during times of transition. We are traveling, changing jobs, in foreign territory, coming home from work, doing nothing. Any of these are potentially moments of vulnerability.

A "gate", that place where mezuzah goes, is a port of transit as we move from one domain to another. We are about to enter our house. There's a need to pause and contemplate seriously just as if we were crossing the border into a foreign country. What challenges lie within? What hazards lurk there? What is the language, the currency of this place? What strategies, what disciplines do I need to succeed, to survive? It is there that we confront that mini-Torah scroll - the mezuzah. Amongst other things it reminds us of the requirement - "Judges and officers you should place for yourself in all your gates..."

We need a judge, that is good judgment, objective assessments before entering a new scene. A good doctor won't come to an operation without having examined the charts first, a teacher dare not

enter the classroom without a lesson plan, and neither would any wise businessman enter a meeting cold and unprepared. The battle is usually won in advance. To foresee is to rule or as the Talmud says, "The wise man sees consequences". There is equally a need for discipline to carry out, to execute the plan of action. The policy should not melt into mere theory upon contact with reality.

Both farsighted wisdom and moral muscle are needed to create and police standards in advance of confronting the many critical-"gates" of life: 1) Boarding a plane 2) Waking up the computer 3) Entering the kitchen 4) Exiting schul 5) Picking up a phone 6) Leaving the house 7) Reading an E-Mail 8) Meeting people 9) Closing our eyes 10) Opening our eyes 11) Turning the key of the car. 12) Tuning the radio.

At all these junctures, and more, it helps to have installed a prior principled plan and to have ready courage to carry it through. That's what gives us a feeling of accomplishment as we navigate through the ever changing scenes of our lives. The victory lies not the mere kissing of the mezuzah by the "gate" but in the applied art of awakening appropriate thoughts and feelings in that prescient moment of pause...

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