

ANOTHER TIME - ANOTHER PLACE

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

Parshas Mishpatim deals to a large extent with monetary law: If Reuven's ox gores Shimon's ox... It is thus strange and noteworthy that the holy Zohar prefaces its commentary on this week's sidrah with a comment about the mystic concept of gilgul - reincarnation. While this may come as a surprise to some, ancient Jewish belief (especially in the Zohar and writings of the holy Arizal) has deep ties with the idea that our souls may have already descended to the earth in previous lives. Still, what does all this have to do with Parshas Mishpatim, and its focus on monetary adjudication?

This question, it is told, was once asked by the Rebbe R' Ber of Mezritch zt"l to his Rebbe the holy Ba'al Shem Tov. "Before I answer your question," the Ba'al Shem Tov told him, "There is something you must do." He was given instructions that in a certain forest, in a certain section of the forest, stood a large tree next to a well of water. R' Ber was to climb up the tree, and wait there, secluded in its branches, until something significant happened. "Oh, and by the way: Whatever you see, you are utterly forbidden to utter a word, nor reveal your presence."

The next morning, R' Ber set out to find the tree near the well. When he found it, he ascended the tree, and waited. After having waited for a few hours, he heard the trot of a horse. A well-attired Jew approached. He had his horse stop, and alighted in order to drink from the well. Having sated his thirst, he opened his sack and removed a large money belt, which he placed at the trunk of the tree, and rested his head upon it as he napped. After a short while, he awoke with a start, and realizing that some time had passed, he hastily mounted his horse, forgetting his money belt. R' Ber remembered the warning of his rebbe, and restrained from calling out to the traveller. The wealthy Jew rode off, leaving over his fortune.

Soon after, a weary traveller approached, and seeing the well, stopped to take a refreshing drink. The large money belt caught his eye, and he picked it up to examine it. Opening it, he was startled to find an immense sum. He looked around to locate its owner, yet there was nobody in sight. Nor did the belt have any identifying characteristics. Not being one to waste an opportunity, the traveller packed the belt among his belongings, and set off. A story seemed to be in the making. R' Ber waited.

After a while, a worn looking traveller approached on foot. Noticing the well, he put down his sack to take a drink, and relieve his weary soul. He sat down beneath the tree to take in the fresh air and rest his feet before continuing on. Suddenly, a horse's gallop became audible. The wealthy man, having

realized his mistake, had returned to retrieve his belt. "Where's my belt?" he cried out, jumping down from his mount. "I left my money belt right here under this tree - what have you done with it?!"

The weary traveller, understandably unsettled by the sudden accusation, denied any knowledge of this man's money belt. "I know you must have it!" he said, and began rummaging through the poor man's belongings. Not finding anything, he turned once again to the traveller. "Where have you hidden it?" he cried, "I know you have it somewhere! Tell me - or I'll strike you!" Overwhelmed, the pauper barely managed to stammer a denial before the wealthy man began to pummel him with blow after blow. "I'll beat you to a pulp!" he yelled, "unless you tell me what you've done with my money." Yet strike as he may, no additional information was forthcoming. Ultimately, the wealthy Jew tired of beating the poor soul. It was unlikely, he thought, that after such a thrashing, he would have the wherewithal to continue denying, unless he was indeed telling the truth. Discouraged, he mounted his steed, and left. The poor Jew washed his wounds with the pure waters of the well, then he too set off on his way. All the while, R' Ber remained suspended in the tree's branches, not uttering a word.

"So," asked the holy Ba'al Shem Tov upon his disciple's return, "did you encounter anything interesting in the woods today? Let me explain something. You probably feel that a tremendous injustice has transpired. One man has lost his fortune, another became rich by chance, and a third man was beaten mercilessly for nothing. Know that, 'All His ways are just.' Many years ago, in a previous gilgul, these three souls came together for a din Torah (a Jewish court case). There was a dispute over a substantial sum of money, which each man claimed was his. The dayan (judge) awarded the money to the wrong man. Had he taken his time and investigated the matter further, he would have realized that he was making a mistake - but he didn't.

"The wealthy man who today lost his money," continued the holy Ba'al Shem Tov, "was the one who was previously awarded the money not rightfully his. The second man, who today came by a windfall, was the one who wrongly lost the previous case. And the weary traveller - he was the soul of the judge, who was deserving of his beating for not taking greater care in rendering his decision.

"There are times when to the untrained eye it may seem that, G-d forbid, the laws of the Torah result in unfair decisions. One man leaves feeling an injustice has occurred, while another knows in his heart that he has been given property not rightfully his. And all this was done in strict adherence to the Shulchan Aruch (Code of Jewish Law)! This is why the Zohar remarks on the first verse of Parshas Mishpatim, 'these are the orders of gilgulim,' for far more is hidden to us than is revealed."

While the mysteries of gilgul are far removed from our sphere of understanding, it is at times worthwhile to remind ourselves that our ability to understand and make sense of what goes on around us is very, very limited. Praiseworthy is he who puts his trust in Hashem.

Have a good Shabbos.

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