

SHOFTIM - - JUDGE FOR YOURSELF

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

Judges and officers you shall appoint in all your cities which Hashem, your G-d, gives you, for your tribes; they shall judge the people righteously. You shall not pervert judgement, you shall not respect someone's presence, and you shall not accept a bribe, for a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and makes just words crooked. (16:18-19)

What is the saddest thing imaginable? Death? Sickness?

A man once came to his doctor with a strange complaint. His illness, while not life-threatening, gave him no peace. Wherever he went and whatever he saw, something would strike him as hilarious, and he would break out in peals of uncontrollable laughter. It had gotten to the point that he could no longer be in public.

"I suggest you go somewhere very sad-perhaps that will jolt you out of your giddiness."

Soon afterwards, the laughter-stricken patient saw a poster announcing the eulogy of a young man who had passed away. "Perhaps a sad hesped will do the trick," he thought. He took a seat in the synagogue, awaiting what was sure to be a tear-jerking speech. Indeed, the rabbi spoke eloquently and with great sadness. But in middle of his eulogy he noticed (why did he always have to notice such things?) that the rabbi's hat was off-centre, and perched precariously on his head. With each emphatic body-movement, he was sure the hat would fly straight off his head into the lap of some unsuspecting front-row sitter. It was too much-against his will, he felt himself bursting into great eruptions of laughter, much to the consternation of the friends and family of the deceased. He was promptly tossed from the shul.

Next, he tried going to the cemetery. But he kept finding spelling mistakes and misplaced phrases on the gravestones that made him laugh all the more.

Frustrated and uncured, he returned to his doctor. "I tried different sad places, but somehow even in the saddest situations, I find humour."

"Come with me-I will show you something truly sad." They went to a hospital. In a hospital bed, surrounded by his family and doctor, lay a young boy, motionless. They were all weeping uncontrollably-even the doctor. Turning to his doctor, the laughter-sick man said, "This is very unusual. I'm used to seeing families cry, but doctors see sickness and death every day. They're immune to it. They have to be, otherwise they would be in constant depression. What's so sad about

this case that even a seasoned doctor is weeping?"

"Why don't you ask him." He did.

"You want to know what it is about this boy that makes me weep?" the doctor said. "This has to be the saddest case I've ever treated. You see, that young boy-he's deaf and mute."

"So?"

"By all measures his illness should not be life-threatening. In fact, it's easily treatable. And yet I sit here helplessly watching him die, and there's nothing I can do. Without him having the ability to communicate what's wrong, I simply can't make an accurate diagnosis. You have no idea how helpless I feel knowing that I have the ability to save his life, and yet I'm unable to do so."

Hearing this, the man-of-laugh's silliness ceased. He too sobbed uncontrollable tears.

Sometimes a Yid strays from the straight path. Hashem needs to punish him- a gentle reminder to repent. "Your stick and Your rod-they have guided me (Tehillim/Psalms 23:4)." It is a very sad moment, to the extent we can express it, for Hashem.

There's only one thing even sadder to Hashem than having to punish His beloved child; when He punishes us, and we don't even 'get it.' At least if we would have paid heed to our 'wake-up call,' there would have been a point to our suffering, and Hashem's. But when we react with resentment and bitterness, instead of with thoughts of teshuvah, Hashem's rod, so to speak, has been wasted. Like the helpless doctor, who tries so desperately to communicate with his mute patient so that he can cure him, Hashem too sheds a tear at our misunderstanding His messages.

Judges and offices you shall appoint in all your cities-the 'cities', sefarim write, allude to the human body (see Nedarim 32b explaining Koheles/Ecclesiastes 9:14: "A small city'-this is the body, 'with few people in it'-these are the limbs.") Each person must have judges and officers-the soul and the intellect, that make sure he is acting as he should be. For your tribes-the Hebrew word for 'tribes,' she'vatecha, alludes to the rod (shevet) with which Hashem punishes. When difficulties befall a person, he must be especially careful to engage his soul and intellect to assess, "What is Hashem trying to say to me?"

You shall not pervert judgement-it's critical when we perform self- judgement that we do so with complete honesty and frankness. Only with absolute truthfulness can we uncover and cure the ailments of the soul; it is through truth that the soul speaks to the intellect.

You shall not respect someone's presence (lo sakir panim)-literally, this disqualifies a judge who gives special treatment to one of the parties who have come to him for judgement. Panim in Hebrew is the revealed aspect, that which we see. It is always easier to put our greatest strength into this-worldly pursuits; their reward is readily apparent; 'in your face (panim)' so to speak. Focusing our time and efforts on holy pursuits such as Torah study and prayer means forsaking revealed reward

for that which remains hidden. This is not easy; it requires great faith and constant review of one's priorities. It is for this that the Torah encourages us: Do not respect the revealed-just because you see it with your eyes doesn't make it valuable. Do not forsake the true bliss of the World to Come for the empty façade of material delight.

And you shall not accept a bribe-the yetzer hara tries to 'bribe' us by showing righteous people who suffer, and wicked people who prosper. "What's the point? Eat, drink, and be merry!" he says. Don't accept his silly bribes. For a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and makes just words crooked-were the reward that awaits the righteous in the World to Come obvious, life would not be a test. A time will come when we will recognize that the pleasures of This World were no more than an empty bribe. But it is only special if we act in accordance with this belief now, when there's still an element of difficulty and bribery. [Chida]

In Elul, the voice of the Shofar calls out: "Wake up, sleepy ones, from your slumber." May Hashem grant us the wisdom to understand its voice, and heed its message.

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