

# EXPRESS YOURSELF

by Rabbi Yisroel Ciner

I would once again like to apologize for not having written the past few weeks. I was running a boys sleep-a-way camp and my family and I were also sleeping away - far away from my computer! I'd like to share some of the experiences that I had there as they somewhat relate to the parsha and very strongly relate to life.

This week we read the parsha of Shoftim. "*Shoftim v'shotrim teeten l'cho b'chol sh'a'recha* [Appoint for you judges and officers at all of your gates] [16:18]."

The S'forno explains that the Torah first commanded the mitzvos which apply to the individual and then commanded those which apply to society at large. These include our judges, leaders, kings, kohanim [priests] and prophets.

Our parsha opens this second set of commandments with the obligation of setting up a proper judicial system in each of our cities. This system includes the shoftim [judges] who pass judgment on the different controversies and the shotrim [officers] who enforce the judge's decision.

Rav Moshe Feinstein zt"l points out that the word: "*lecho* [for you]," seems superfluous and disjointed. This 'society-type' commandment could have simply stated "appoint judges and officers"! Why did the Torah add the word: "lecho"?

He explains that the Torah is teaching us a very fundamental concept. In addition to the need for society at large to have these shoftim and shotrim, each individual must be both a judge and officer over himself. "Lecho - for you." Over you. Constantly overseeing your own action and making sure that they are what they should be.

The Mishna [Avos 2:18] states: "*Al t'hee rosho bifnei atz'm'cho*," literally, don't be evil before yourself. The Rambam explains this to mean that we shouldn't judge ourselves as being wicked. Our behavior is greatly influenced by our self-image. One of the basic precepts in discipline is to condemn the behavior and not the child. You are not bad! You did something bad... If I'm wicked then I'll act in a wicked way. The Mishna therefore teaches us not to judge ourselves as being wicked. It very well might turn into a self fulfilling prophecy.

Another explanation provides a totally different angle. *Al t'hee rosho bifnei atz'm'cho* - don't be evil before yourself. Others might give you a lot of honor and speak very highly of you... They might view you as a role model and aspire to be like you... But you know the truth!!! You are very painfully aware

of your shortcomings and your lapses. You know who and what you really are. Don't allow yourself to be blinded by their praises. Al t'hee rosho bifnei atz'm'cho - don't be evil before yourself, because you know the truth about yourself.

Therefore, as Rav Moshe wrote, we must be judges and officers over ourselves.

Where should these judges sit? "B'chol sh'a'recha [In all of your gates]." The Shla"h Hakodesh writes that a person has seven gates: two eyes, two ears, two nostrils and a mouth. The way that these gates are used will either build or destroy the person. A person must appoint shoftim and shotrim to control the flow through these gates.

Guarding our tongues from lashon harah (derogatory speech) is a very worthwhile topic but I'd like to discuss a very different problem. Of the almost one hundred boys in camp there were two, very opposite boys, who in my opinion stuck out.

One of them was one of two twins. This was the twin's second summer in the camp. They both have learning disabilities, and encountered difficulties fitting in and 'making it' in a camp with 'normal' kids. One was very homesick throughout. The staff spent many hours with him trying to help him adjust and reach the point where he'd want to stay. He had constant ups and downs swinging from "I love it here" to "I'm out of here". It was decided that since he had 'stuck it out' for a serious amount of time and still wanted to leave that we'd send him home but make him feel like a hero for lasting as long as he did and not like a failure for leaving early.

His twin brother was very different. A bit more socially adept and determined, he wanted camp to last forever. He too had his difficult moments but some added attention was all he needed. At one point when he needed a boost, I handed him a whistle and appointed him to be my assistant. Everyone took it lightly besides him. To him, being in charge of a camp was very serious business. He would run from field to field to make sure that all was running smoothly and then proudly report back to me that all was well.

At the end of camp, many campers feel emotions but most are too inhibited to openly express them. This boy became the speaker for the camp. "My heart, my heart, my heart is aching," he'd say to me. "My heart aches that camp is ending. My heart, my heart, my heart is aching!"

At the far other end of the spectrum was another boy. He had suffered a personal loss in his life a few years back and was having difficulty adjusting. This translated into difficulties in getting along with others and sometimes destructive behavior. I was biding my time, hoping that at some point during the short camp season I'd be able to have a meaningful discussion with him besides the disciplining that my position demanded of me.

On an overnight, just a few nights before camp was going to end, he was caught with toothpaste in hand about to 'raid' another camper who, deep in his sleep, had no intention at that time of brushing his teeth and no constructive use for toothpaste. I was awakened by his angry yells at the staff

member who had the audacity to thwart his plans by confiscating his toothpaste.

I spoke to him for a little while about his pain and anger and about the destructive and self-defeating way he was expressing it. I then told him that I understand that he's angry about life in general and asked if he'd like to go for a walk and talk a bit. I was shocked when he said he would.

We went off to the side and I began to ask him questions about his loss. I got him to discuss it but only in a detached manner. I tried so hard to open him up and get him to express some real feelings but I couldn't break that wall he had erected around him. During the course of our conversation it became clear to me that he really had no one with whom he was able to discuss his loss and cry together with.

The contrast still startles me. One camper, mildly retarded, with almost no inhibitions, able to unabashedly express exactly what he was feeling. Expressing it, coming to terms with it and able to move on. Another camper, 'normal', with a fortress built around him, unable to unload, unable to deal with himself and his environment.

*"Shoftim v'shotrim teeten l'cho b'chol sh'a'recha [Appoint for you judges and officers at all of your gates] [16:18]."* We must judge and guard ourselves. We also must find those whose guards are working overtime, suffocating and stifling their need to express their pain in an honest and constructive manner and help free them from those shackles.

Good Shabbos,

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