



6 SEPTEMBER 2024

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From the Rabbi's Desk

Dear Friends

I have some thought that I am bursting to share with you.

I have just returned from a family simcha in Manchester. There were many emotions and prayers at the wedding and I am grateful that I was able to attend.

On Sunday, my brother took us up North to the Lake District and this is what I want to share:

One of the themes of Elul , Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur is "Chadesh Yameinu Keh keddem"

Literally , "Renew our days as old". Is that not a contradiction? 'Renewal' together with 'old'?

Here is an answer. The lake District is a popular tourist attraction. It is a natural beauty – Clear lakes, lush fields, big farms and mountains; all this with sheep grazing in the background.

Another reason why tourists are attracted to that part of the world is to visit the small English villages with the many English bars and pubs. These villages have been preserved in time. The houses are still built with the old grey slate stones that were popular in the 17 hundreds. There is something extremely refreshing when one connects with the old.

While times have changed, certain things have remained constant. This is perhaps the wish and prayer of "Renew our days as old". Let us be rejuvenated and excited with our Judaism that has remained constant and steady throughout time.

Wishing you Shabbat Shalom & Ktivah Va Chatima Tovah

Rabbi Uzvolk

INSIDE THIS ISSUE:

Calendar	2.
Yahrtzeits	2.
Parshat Shoftim	4.
A Matter of Trust	5.

SHABBAT TIMES

STARTS	5:39pm
ENDS	6:33pm
SHACHARIT	9:00am
MINCHA	5:30pm

BH'

"FIRST FRIDAYS" L'CHAIM!

*Victory Park Shul
Invites you to join us
for a L'Chaim
after shul this Friday*

6 September 2024

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Insights PARSHAT SHOFTIM

DEUTERONOMY 16:18 – 21:9

The name of the Parshah, "Shoftim," means "Judges" and it is found in Deuteronomy 16:18.

Moses instructs the people of Israel to appoint judges and law enforcement officers in every city. "Justice, justice shall you pursue," he commands them, and you must administer it without corruption or favouritism. Crimes must be meticulously investigated and evidence thoroughly examined—a minimum of two credible witnesses is required for conviction and punishment.

In every generation, says Moses, there will be those entrusted with the task of interpreting and applying the laws of the Torah. "According to the law that they will teach you, and the judgment they will instruct you, you shall do; you shall not turn away from the thing that they say to you, to the right nor to the left."

Shoftim also includes the prohibitions

against idolatry and sorcery; laws governing the appointment and behaviour of a king; and guidelines for the creation of "cities of refuge" for the inadvertent murderer. Also set forth are many of the rules of war: the exemption from battle for one who has just built a home, planted a vineyard, married, or is "afraid and soft-hearted"; the requirement to offer terms of peace before attacking a city; and the prohibition against wanton destruction of something of value, exemplified by the law that forbids to cut down a fruit tree when laying siege (in this context the Torah makes the famous statement, "For man is a tree of the field").

The Parshah concludes with the law of the *eglah arufah*—the special procedure to be followed when a person is killed by an unknown murderer and his body is found in a field—which underscores the responsibility of the community and its leaders not only for what they do, but also for what they might have prevented from being done.

Summary of the Weekly Torah Reading

First Aliyah: We are commanded to appoint judges in every city of Israel. These judges are instructed to adjudicate fairly. Capital punishment is prescribed for idolatry, and various idolatrous practices are banned. The sacrifices we offer to G♁d must be free of blemishes. We must follow the rulings of the Sanhedrin (the rabbinic supreme court) and of the Oral Law. Refusal to accept the Sanhedrin's authority is a capital offense.

Second Aliyah: Moses instructs the Israelites to coronate a king after they enter Israel. A Jewish king may not amass an excessive amount of horses, wives or personal wealth. The king writes for himself two Torah scrolls. One of them remains with him at all times—a constant reminder to remain humble and follow G♁d's law.

Third Aliyah: The *kohanim* were chosen by G♁d to be His holy servants. They do not receive an inheritance (portion) in the Land of Israel, because "G♁d is their inheritance." Instead, the *kohanim* are the beneficiaries of various priestly gifts, including select portions of meat from animals slaughtered for private use (not as sacrifices), as well as tithes from

crops and wool.

Fourth Aliyah: Although the priestly families were divided into many shifts, each serving in the Temple in their designated turn, a *kohen* always retains the right to come to the Temple and personally offer his own sacrifices. This section then continues with prohibitions against divination, fortunetelling and similar occult practices. Instead of probing into the future, we are commanded to put our faith and trust in G♁d.

Fifth Aliyah: We also have no need for these abovementioned abominable practices, because we are blessed with prophets who transmit G♁d's messages to His people. We are commanded to obey these prophets. This section prescribes the punishments for noncompliance with prophets' words, as well as for an individual who falsely claims to speak in G♁d's name. This *aliyah* then reiterates the command to establish cities of refuge for the inadvertent murderer. Moses commands the Jews to designate six such cities and, when G♁d expands the borders of the land (with the coming of Moshiach), to add another three cities of refuge.

Sixth Aliyah: A minimum of two wit-

nesses are required to secure a conviction in a case involving capital or corporal punishment. Individuals who testify falsely are liable to receive the punishment that they sought to have imposed upon their innocent victim. The procedure for battle is outlined in this section. When approaching the battlefield, a *kohen* addresses the troops, admonishing them not to fear the enemy, and listing the various individuals who are exempt from military duty, such as one who has recently betrothed a woman or built a new home, or a fainthearted and fearful person.

Seventh Aliyah: Before waging battle against an enemy in battle, we are commanded to make a peaceful overture. Only if the enemy does not accept the offer does battle ensue. In the battles against the Canaanite nations, if the enemy does not agree to the peace offer, the Israelites are commanded to completely annihilate them. We are forbidden to cut down fruit-bearing trees while laying siege on a city. The reading closes with the procedure to be followed in the event of an unsolved murder.

A Matter of Trust

By [Tova Bernbaum](#)

Trust is a funny thing. Every day I see the way my one-year-old daughter delights in the world, and I get a little sad. She smiles at strangers, all strangers, even the creepy ones. At the beach, she tries to drink in the ocean water foaming in the sand. When older kids laugh at her, she laughs too, unaware that they're making fun of her.

All of this makes me sad, because I know it has to end. For her own protection, I must teach her that strangers can be dangerous, that ocean water is polluted, that kids can be cruel. She will one day know the difference between laughing with and laughing at someone.

I know this education is a necessary part of growing up. We've all been through it, and we're all the wiser for it. When we're young, it's the strangers we have to watch out for, but as we grow older the list expands. Over time we come to the realization that many of the people or things we thought we could count on—parents, community, government—are just as fallible as we are.

So we become a little more guarded, which is okay. We need that protective layer. There's just one problem. We spend our youth building up cynicism, then we come to our 20s and 30s and are suddenly expected to make all those big life changes, like marriage and kids, that require faith in our fellow human beings, not to mention in ourselves. If we spend so much of our lives learning to be sceptical, how do we ever get to the point where we're ready to trust each other?

Parshat Shoftim offers an interesting insight into this issue. In describing the laws regarding judges, the Torah says, "You shall not deviate from the word that they [the judges of the Jewish courts] tell you, right or left." Rashi comments that the verse is telling us to obey the courts "even if they tell you left is right and right is left."

We all understand the idea of adhering to the law of the land, but obeying authority figures even when they seem to be totally wrong? It's a strange rule to lay out, especially since the Jewish people are not known for their docile submission. Rashi's quote reminds me of a famous story that also puzzled me when I first came across it.

The Talmud relates that Rabbi Eliezer once had a disagreement with his colleagues about a point in *halachah*. Rabbi Eliezer said to them: "If the law is as I say, may the carob tree prove it." The carob tree was then uprooted from its place, but the other sages were unimpressed. "One cannot prove anything from a carob tree," they said.

Rabbi Eliezer pressed on: "If the law is as I say, may the aqueduct prove it," at which point the water in the aqueduct began to flow backwards. Still, his colleagues main-

tained their position: "One cannot prove anything from an aqueduct."

But Rabbi Eliezer was not discouraged: "If the law is as I say, then may the walls of the house of study prove it." The walls began to cave in, but the debate raged on.

Finally, Rabbi Eliezer declared: "If the law is as I say, may it be proven from heaven!" And sure enough, a heavenly voice cried out: "What do you want of Rabbi Eliezer—the law is as he says . . ."

At this point, Rabbi Yehoshua stood on his feet and said: "The Torah is not in heaven! . . . We take no notice of heavenly voices, since You, G-d, have already, at Sinai, written in the Torah to follow the majority."

When I first heard this story in high school, I was outraged. The whole idea of "majority rules" seemed so establishment, so military, and so completely the opposite of the way I was raised. My mother is a staunchly democratic ex-hippie, so I was always taught to question authority. I also found it strange that the Torah—perfect and timeless—would have this flawed human element built into its structure. How can it be perfect, I reasoned, if fallible human beings are given the power to interpret it?

I've grown up a little since then, though, and I find that the older I get, the less enthralled I am with the idea of perfection. Or maybe I should say that my notion of perfection has changed. It's not the black-and-white, right-or-wrong of my youth. I know how flawed I am, and I know that no one else is perfect either, but I see beauty in the imperfection. There's something inspiring about creatures with so many foibles working to perfect themselves when they could easily give up, daunted by the seemingly impossible task ahead of them.

I also see the brilliance in this story about Rabbi Eliezer. Like Rashi's comment about obeying the judges even if their ruling makes no sense to us, the Talmud is teaching us an important lesson about trust. G-d knew full well that He was giving fallible human beings the power to interpret His will, but he handed us the responsibility anyway. He took His Torah—so perfect and pure—and placed it in the hands of decidedly imperfect people who live in a decidedly imperfect world. By doing so, He let us know that sometimes being able to trust is more important than having everything jibe perfectly with our own sense of what is correct and logical.

Of course, that doesn't mean we have to be naive, or that we should follow blindly, or that we shouldn't inform our children about the dangers out there. We can still be honest about the flaws within ourselves and the world around us, just as long as we recognize that there are times when we have to transcend our scepticism and believe in our fellow human beings, and in ourselves. After all, if G-d has faith in us, then we can certainly have faith in one another.