Parsha Perspectives FOR TODAY

Short Divrei Torah on Shoftim for your Shabbos Table by Rabbi Efrem Goldberg

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DVAR TORAH FOR THE FRIDAY NIGHT MEAL

Judging Favorably to be Judged Favorably

שופטים ושוטרים תתן לך בכל שעריך...ושפטו את העם משפט צדק.

"You shall appoint judges and enforcers in all your gates... and they shall judge the nation justly."

The Rachmastrivka Rebbe, in *Amaros Tehoros*, comments that this *pasuk*, which introduces Parshas Shoftim – the *parsha* read at the beginning of the month of Elul – alludes to the judgment that takes place each year on Rosh Hashanah. שופטים ושוטרים תתן לך – we will all stand judgment in just a few weeks, and the way we prepare for this judgment is ושפטו את העם משפט צדק – by judging other people favorably. If we give other people the benefit of the doubt, if we are forgiving, if we reserve judgment, realizing that there is so much we do not know about other people and why they act as they do, then Hashem will do the same for us.

Usually, we are our own best lawyers. We know how to give ourselves the benefit of the doubt, justifying our conduct, finding ways to excuse ourselves for our mistakes, and assuring ourselves that even if we do things wrong, we're all-in-all pretty good people. When it comes to others, however, we are generally far more exacting. We rush to criticize and condemn, and are reluctant to find mitigating factors, or to respect and admire people despite their faults and failings. ושפטו את העם משפט צדק alludes to the need to judge other people the way we want to be judged, to come to their defense the way we come to our own defense. And if we view others favorably, then we will be viewed favorably as we stand trial before Hashem on Rosh Hashanah.

The Mishna in *Pirkei Avos* (2:4) famously instructs, אל תדין את חברך עד שתגיע למקומו – "Do not judge your fellow until you are in his place." It's easy to jump to conclusions, to right away assume the worst about people. But if we are honest with ourselves, we will understand that we know so little about people and what they're going through. The Mishna tells us not to judge people until we are in their place – which means we must never judge, because we will never be in a person's place. We will never know how a person's instincts, background, past experiences and current circumstances affect his behavior. If we meet somebody we know in a store, and he just passes us by without even saying hello, it's easy to feel angry and upset. But do we know the whole story? Perhaps he was rushing to buy Tylenol for his infant who's running a high fever, or is under some other kind of pressure. We never know. We want people to give us the benefit of the doubt when we act wrongly or appear to act wrongly – so we must do the same for them.

Moreover, just as we accept ourselves despite our deficiencies, we must accept others, as well. We know that we are far from perfect, but we nevertheless accept who we are, because we have realistic expectations of ourselves. We must look at others precisely the same way. Everyone has their struggles and challenges. We are to judge people favorably, in a positive light, and we will then be judged the same way by Hashem.

Checking Our "Blind Spots"

ולא תקח שוחד כי השוחד יעור פקחים ויסלף דברי צדיקים.

"And do not take a bribe, because a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise, and distorts the words of the righteous." (16:19)

Rav Yisroel Meir Druck takes note of the fact that the Torah describes a bribe as affecting not a judge's mind, but his eyes (יעור עיני חכמים). A bribe clouds the judge's vision, not allowing him to see the facts clearly and accurately.

Rav Druck notes in this context the Rambam's comments in *Hilchos Rotzeiach* (12:14) regarding the prohibition of לפני עור לא תתן מכשול – not to place a stumbling block before a blind person (Vayikra 19:14). *Chazal* understood that the Torah here refers not to actually placing an object in the path of a blind pedestrian to make him fall, but rather to causing another person to sin. The Rambam explains why the victim in this case is called an עור, a "blind person": שהוא עור ואינו רואה דרך האמת מפני תאות לבו – "that he is 'blind' and does not see the true path because of his heart's desire." A person's desires make him blind to the truth, clouding his vision so that he sees things the wrong way. A person who wants money might regard illicit financial dealings as legitimate. A person craving prestige will find a way to excuse crooked means of attaining a distinguished position. When we want something badly enough, our eyes will see what we want them to see. Indeed, the Gemara teaches in Maseches Chulin (44b) that somebody

can be trusted as an honest scholar if רואה טריפה לעצמו – he has the integrity to declare his own meat *treif*. If he slaughtered an animal to partake of its meat, and, after inspecting it, determined that the animal had a condition that renders it forbidden for consumption, then this shows his honesty. Many people would be "blind" to the סימני טריפה – the indicators of a disqualifying medical condition – when checking their own animal, not wanting to incur this significant financial loss. It takes a high level of integrity to be willing to see objectively when one's own money is at stake.

And thus the Torah speaks of bribes as "blinding" a judge. After accepting money from a litigant, the judge sees the evidence and the arguments differently, as his vision has been blurred by his favorable bias toward the litigant who bribed him.

When we were learning how to drive, before the advent of screens on the dashboard showing us what's going on around us, we were taught about checking our "blind spots." There is a spot to the side of the car where another vehicle might be present but not visible in the rear-view mirror. We were therefore taught that before switching lanes, we need to look in the mirror and then quickly glance to the side to check our blind spot.

In life, too, we have "blind spots," things that we simply cannot see, because of our biases. When a decision needs to be made, we may not necessarily be able to assess the choices with pure objectivity, and we might not be able to see the situation with precise accuracy, due to our wishes and desires. Before "changing lanes," before making our decision, we need to check these "blind spots" by seeking advice. As *Chazal* urge, מרבה עצה מרבה תבונה – the more we seek advice, the wiser we become (*Avos* 2:7). We should get advice from people who aren't "blinded" by our biases, who have clearer vision, and can thus give us an accurate picture of the situation and the different options available to us.

DVAR TORAH FOR THE SHABBOS DAY MEAL

The Letter י'

The Torah commands that the king of Israel must not have excessive wealth, or an excessive amount of horses or wives: רק לא ירבה לו סוסים...ולא ירבה לו נשים, וכסף וזהב לא ירבה לו מאד (17:16-17)).

The Midrash (*Shemos Rabba* 6:1) tells that Shlomo Ha'melech married many women despite the Torah's prohibition, because he felt that it did not apply to him. The Torah writes that a king should not have many wives ולא יסור לבבו – because his wives might lead him astray, and Shlomo felt confident that אני ארבה ולבי לא יסור – his heart would remain steadfastly devoted to Hashem even if he had many wives. At that moment, the Midrash relates, the letter י' at the beginning of the word ירבה came before God to protest. It argued that no letter of the Torah is meant to ever be erased, or neglected, and yet הרי שלמה עומד ומבטל אותי – Shlomo was "cancelling" it, the letter י' of ירבה.

What does this Midrash mean? How are we to understand this "complaint" lodged by the letter י'?

Rav Soloveitchik explained the Midrash's comments by noting the grammatical function served by the letter י' at the beginning of words, such as in the word ירבה. At the beginning of a verb, the י' turns the verb into future tense. This letter י', then, signifies the future, and the need to anticipate the long-term consequences of our decisions and actions. Shlomo Ha'melech felt confident that his many wives would not lead his heart astray, but he failed to take into account the influence they would have on him many years later. We read in Sefer Melachim I (11:4), ויהי לעת זקנת שלמה נשיו הטו את לבבו – his wives indeed led his heart away from God toward the end of his life, when he reached old age. At the time he married them, he was correct in his assessment that he would not be negatively influenced by them. But he failed to consider the י' – the distant future.

The protest brought by the letter י' was against this failure of Shlomo – failing to anticipate the "slippery slope," the long-term effects of his decision. We need to open our eyes to see not only the current circumstances, but also the implications that our actions will have many years down the road.

DVAR TORAH FOR SHALOSH SEUDOS

It Starts With Integrity

תמים תהיה עם ה' אלוקיך.

"You shall be 'innocent' with Hashem your God" (18:13)

Rashi explains this *pasuk* to mean that we mustn't resort to horoscopes and fortune tellers, but rather place our trust in Hashem. Instead of fretting about what the future might bring, and resorting to superstition, we should instead accept everything as Hashem's will (התהלך עמו בתמימות...ולא תחקור אחר עתידות, אלא כל מה שיבוא עליך קבל בתמימות).

The *Orach La'chayim* offers an additional interpretation of this *pasuk*, explaining that it alludes to the critical importance of honesty and integrity. The word תמים, which literally means "complete" and "whole," implies consistency, that פיו ולבו שווין – one's heart and mouth are precisely aligned, without any discrepancy between them. The imperative תמים תהיה commands us to be honest, to avoid deceit and duplicity, to say what we mean, to be reliable and dependable, and to follow through when we give someone our word. And if we live with תמימות, if we deal with people honestly, then עם ה' אלוקיך – we are able to live our lives "with Hashem," enjoying a close relationship with Him.

Before anything else, we must have integrity. No matter how long a *Shemona Esrei* one recites, no matter how many *chumros* (stringencies) he observes, and no matter how much Gemara he masters, he cannot live עם ה' אלוקיך, he cannot be said to live a religious life, in the presence of God, if he lacks תמימות, if he is dishonest and cannot be trusted. One cannot possibly expect to build a relationship with Hashem if he is deceitful, if he is not honest in his dealings with other people. Only if תמים תהיה – a person acts with integrity – can he then spend his life עם ה' אלוקיך, together with Hashem.