



DIVREI MENACHEM

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Guard Thy Gates!

We are entering the palace of the king, only to be confronted with guards at the gate. We make our way to the castle, but a deep moat bars our entrance. We then try to force our way into the nearby pleasure grounds, but there is a ticket office: Not everyone is allowed in. So, what's going on?

Our Parsha begins with the well-known verse, "Judges and officers shall you appoint (*Titten-Lecha*) in all your *gates*." On face value, the plain meaning is clear. Courts should be established in all the cities in the land to resolve disputes and set down the law. Moreover, officers of the law would enforce standards and summon violators to the courts for adjudication.

The first question to ask, however, is why the command to appoint judges is given in the second-person singular and not in the plural form? For, typically, the injunction to appoint judges (who would sit by the gates of the cities) was to be carried out by a number of people and not by an individual. And, then, we should ask,

why the specific expression, "*Lechah*," meaning 'for you'?

The Netivot Shalom characteristically explains this opening sentence as a parable. The directive is indeed addressed to each of us, 'for you' – for your benefit. And those gates are the gates that each of us possesses within our consciousness. There are gates that protect what we see, we hear, we smell, we speak, and we touch. In Psychology 101, we learn that these senses operate as our means of perception, of initial awareness. Based on our past experiences, these senses then arouse associations within us and trigger responses that, sometimes, are beyond our immediate control.

The rabbi thus reminds us to activate our "gates," to build fences around the mechanisms that stir our arousal, and to control what it is our eyes behold, our mouths declare, and our ears discern. Ideally, we would exercise a kind of filter, only allowing to pass through those gates stimuli that serve to bring us closer to G-d and His service.

Each of us, it appears, needs to create a private court and mechanism for policing our thoughts and actions. Easier said than done! We should recall, of course, that our senses are not primarily evil or corrupt. On the contrary, they serve to awaken us

to Mitzvot: smelling the spices on Motzei Shabbat, tasting the wine on the Chagim, hearing the blessings of the priests, eating Matzah on Pesach, offering up our prayers, and so on.

The point is that we somehow need a generic, master control that regulates these personal gates that adorn our being and sense of self. Clearly, opines the Netivot Shalom, relying on our intellect alone is insufficient protection against the *Yetzer Hara* that works overtime to create cracks within those gates.

We are to activate our internal system of judgment that informs us that what we are about to do conforms to the will of Hashem. We are to enter our inner private chambers, and, like the barristers of today, we are to check the precedents and “the law books” to inquire whether our premeditated actions are pleasing to the King or, G-d forbid, displeasing.

Let us hope and pray that we can live up to this challenge and that we can internalize the words our prophets and poets:

“Lift your eyes on high and see Who created these?” (Isaiah 14).

And

“[Let] my heart and my flesh extol in You” (Tehillim 84).

And

“Let all my bones declare ‘Who is like you?’” (Tehillim 35). ■

Shabbat Shalom!

Menachem Persoff

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