



THE PERSON IN THE PARSHA

BY RABBI DR. TZVI HERSH WEINREB
OU EXECUTIVE VICE PRESIDENT, EMERITUS

“Careers”

“What do you want to be when you grow up?” That was once the standard question to ask an eight- or nine-year-old when trying to make conversation with him or her. Somehow, every child had an answer, which ranged from “fireman” to “football player” to “nurse.”

It seems to me that we don’t ask that question of children these days, at least not as frequently as we used to. Perhaps we are afraid to put pressure upon them. Or perhaps ambition is no longer viewed as a positive value, as it once was.

The fact is that our tradition does value ambition, if it leads to some positive goal. A career which helps a person support himself and his family is one such goal. A career which serves the community is another.

Which careers are especially valued by the Torah? This week’s Torah portion, *Parshat Mishpatim* (Exodus 21:1-25:18), provides us with an occasion to reflect upon one highly valued career, serving on a court of law as a judge.

Our *parsha* begins with the verse, “These are the rules that you shall set before them.” Rashi understands the phrase “before them” to mean that questions regarding these rules must be adjudicated by Jewish judges familiar with the rules which are outlined in the ensuing several chapters of the *parsha*. Already in last week’s *parsha*, *Yitro*, we learned that

Moses saw the role of judge as being one of his leadership responsibilities. Only at the advice of his father-in-law did he assign the role of judge to a hierarchy of others. Judgeship is thus one of the first careers prescribed by the Torah.

The Talmud has something to say about just how noble a career judgeship is and, in the process, recommends several other excellent career paths for “nice Jewish boys.” I am referring to the following passage in the tractate *Bava Batra* 8b, which in turn interprets two biblical verses:

“The knowledgeable will be radiant like the bright expanse of sky, and those who lead the many to righteousness will be like the stars forever and ever” (*Daniel* 12:3).

‘The knowledgeable’ are the judges who adjudicate the law with absolute truthfulness, as well as those who serve the community as trustees who distribute charity (*gabba’ei tzedakah*). ‘Those who lead the many’ are the schoolteachers of young children...

And as for Torah scholars? To them, the following verse applies:

“May His beloved be as the sun rising in night!” (*Judges* 5:31).

There we have it. Four admirable careers are set forth by the Talmud: the judiciary, involvement in the distribution of charity, primary education, and Torah scholarship.

Tosafot, the collection of commentary in the margin of every page of Talmud, suggests that there is a rank order to these “careers.” Starlight is less bright than “the bright expanse of sky.” This implies that school teaching is less

praiseworthy than acting as a judge or *gabbai tzedakah*, whereas the Talmud scholar, who is compared to the sun, ranks highest.

Other commentaries interpret the Talmudic text differently. One interesting approach is taken by the 19th-century rabbi of Lyssa, Rabbi Yaakov Loberbaum, who is known for his masterwork on civil law, *Netivot HaMishpat*. He objects to the approach taken by *Tosafot*. After all, he asks, “Our eyes can see that the stars are brighter than the ‘expanse of the sky,’ and what connection is there between judges and *gabbai tzedakah* that allows us to compare both of them to the celestial expanse?”

His answer is most instructive: “There are materials which are colorless, but which reflect whatever color shines upon them. An example is glass. It has no color of its own. Shine a red light upon it, and the color red is reflected. Shine a green light, and green is reflected. The expanse of the sky is itself colorless like glass. This is what a judge has in common with a trustee of charity. They both must be absolutely neutral, with no color of their own. The judge must be totally unbiased, and so must be the person who determines how charity is to be distributed. He must not favor one needy person over another but must distribute the community funds ‘without color.’ But schoolteachers are compared to the stars, which glow equally upon all. Whereas judges and *gabbai tzedakah* must discriminate between one party and the other, the schoolteacher must ‘shine’ upon all of his pupils equally, without discrimination.”

Although the Lyssa Rav does not comment on Torah scholars and their likeness to the sun, we can speculate on that connection for ourselves. The sun is the ultimate source of light and heat, and so too the Torah is the

ultimate source of intellectual light and spiritual warmth. Torah study, our tradition teaches us, outweighs all other values in its importance.

Truth to tell, each one of us individually must strive to incorporate into our behavior all four of these career roles. We are all “judges,” even if not clothed in judicial robes or sitting in judicial chambers. We are constantly called upon to judge others in all sorts of ways, and we must always attempt to honestly judge ourselves.

We all must decide how to distribute our charitable resources: the time we give to the community and the money we contribute to the needy.

We are all teachers; if not in the classroom, then in the family and synagogue and shopping mall.

And we certainly must all, according to our intellectual limitations and the restrictions that time places upon us, be diligent in our Torah study and become as knowledgeable in Torah as we possibly can.

From this perspective, each and every one of us is called upon to discharge the duties of our “careers:” judge others without bias; distribute our resources compassionately and fairly; teach little children in some appropriate manner; and, above all, study Torah.

If we do, then we are all worthy of being called luminaries as bright as the bright expanse of the sky, shining like the stars at night, and lighting up the world like the sun by day. ■