



RABBI SHALOM

ROSNER

RAV KEHILLA, OHEL EPHRAIM IN NOFEI HASHEMESH

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Shoftim Ve'Shotrim: Taking it Personally

As Chodesh Elul begins, *parashat Shoftim* directs us toward introspection, self-assessment, and spiritual growth. The opening mitzvah of the *parasha* establishes the framework for a just society:

שֹׁפְטִים וְשֹׁטְרִים תִּתֵּן לָךְ בְּכָל־שְׁעָרֶיךָ

*Judges and officers shall you appoint for yourself in all your gates.*¹

At first glance, this imperative appears to address the Jewish nation collectively. Establishing courts and systems of justice is a communal responsibility. Yet the Torah curiously uses the singular form: תתן לך - *you shall appoint for yourself*.

The *Ba'ale Musar* explain that embedded within this mitzvah is a profound personal message. Every individual must establish *judges and officers* within himself. Each person should establish an internal system

of honest evaluation and disciplined self-regulation. Elul is the season when each person must ask: *Am I living according to the values and potential that Hashem has given me?*

The sefer *Lehitaneig BeTa'anugim*² cites a Midrash concerning Yosef's revelation to his brothers:

לכשיבוא הקדוש ברוך הוא ויזכיר כל אחד ואחד לפי

מה שהוא

*In the future, when Hashem reproves each person, it will be according to who he is.*³

This phrase *according to who he is* (לפי), contains an essential foundation of *avodat Hashem*. Divine judgment is deeply personal. Hashem does not measure people against one another. Rather, every person is judged according to the unique abilities, strengths, struggles, and opportunities with which he was endowed.

A particular action may be considered insignificant for one person and extraordinary for another. One individual arriving five minutes late to shul may reflect carelessness; for someone else, simply coming to shul at all may represent a tremendous spiritual achievement. The same action can carry entirely different meaning depending on the individual.

The Torah commands:

2. Rav Y. Greenboim, *Lehitaneig BeTa'anugim*

3. Bereshit Rabbah 93:10

1. Devarim 16:18

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שפטים ושקרים תתן-לך - establish standards for *yourself*, according to *your* spiritual reality. This perspective carries enormous significance during Elul. Growth in *avodat Hashem* cannot be based on imitation alone. Spiritual aspirations must be authentic and appropriate to one's current level.

The mashgiach Rav Yerucham Levovitz once described how he observed the great Talmid Chacham Rav Yitzchak Blazer maintain a complete *Taanit Dibur* (undertaking not to speak) throughout the month of Elul, speaking only words of Torah and tefillah. Rav Yerucham initially wished to adopt the same practice himself. Yet after reflection, he concluded that such a conduct was not appropriate for his own spiritual level.

This insight is both subtle and critical. Sometimes a person adopts stringencies or practices that appear lofty, only to discover later that they are unsustainable or spiritually counterproductive. One who attempts to climb several rungs at once may ultimately fall from the ladder altogether.

Authentic growth requires honesty. We must neither underestimate ourselves nor attempt to become someone we are not. This idea appears again in the Midrash⁴ regarding Esav and Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel. Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel declared: *All my life I served my father, yet I did not attain even one hundredth of the honor Eisav showed his father.*

The Midrash describes how Eisav would wear distinguished garments when attending to Yitzchak, while Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel served his father in ordinary clothing. The obvious question arises: if he admired Eisav's conduct so greatly, why did he not imitate it?

The answer is that spiritual behavior must emerge organically from one's authentic level.

4. Bereshit Rabbah 65:16

A lofty external act detached from inner reality can become artificial rather than elevating. Growth must be genuine, measured, and integrated into the person one truly is.

A similar principle emerges from the Gemara⁵ regarding Mar Ukva. Mar Ukva remarked that compared to his father, he was *like vinegar compared to wine*, because his father waited twenty-four hours between meat and milk, whereas he himself waited only until the next meal. Yet despite his admiration, Mar Ukva did not adopt his father's practice, recognizing that one must serve Hashem in an authentic manner in accordance with where one is at in life.

This is the *avodah* of Elul. The goal is not merely to become more religious externally, nor to imitate the practices of others. Rather, Elul calls upon us to discover what Hashem genuinely asks of us - personally, honestly, and realistically.

Every individual possesses unique gateways into the soul. Each person has different strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and struggles. The command of placing judges at our gates - teaches that the work of self-judgment must penetrate every dimension of one's life and personality.

One of the greatest obstacles to spiritual

5. Chulin 105b

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growth is comparison. We often look sideways instead of inward. We measure ourselves against the accomplishments, or public image of others, forgetting that Hashem created every soul with a unique mission. Elul reminds us that authentic *avodat Hashem* begins not with imitation, but with truth.

Hashem does not ask us to become someone else. He asks us to become the fullest version of ourselves. The real question of Elul is therefore not: *"Why am I not like another person?"* Rather: *"Am I becoming who I am capable of being?"*

When a person serves Hashem with sincerity and self-awareness, every small act becomes infinitely precious. The gates of the soul begin to open, and the internal judges and officers guide a person toward clarity, growth, and closeness to Hashem.

May we merit during the days leading up to the *Yamim Noraim* to establish true *judges and officers* within ourselves, to recognize our unique mission, and to stand before Hashem not as imitations of others, but as the people we were created to become. ■

Dr. Victor Stiebel

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