



Parshas Shoftim

For the week ending 7 Elul 5758
28 - 29 August 1998

Overview

Moshe tells *Bnei Yisrael* to appoint judges and officers in their cities. A bribe of even an insignificant sum is forbidden. Trees are not to be planted near Hashem's altar, as was the way of idolaters. Blemishes in animals designated for offerings and other points of disqualification are listed. The Great Sanhedrin is to make binding decisions on new situations according to Torah criteria to prevent the fragmentation of the Torah. A very learned scholar who refuses to accept the Halachic decisions of the Sanhedrin incurs the death penalty. A Jewish king may only have possessions and symbols of power commensurate with the honor of his office, but not for self-aggrandizement. He is to write for himself two *sifrei Torah*, one to be kept with him wherever he goes, so that he doesn't become haughty. Neither the *kohanim* nor the *levi'im* are to inherit land in the Land of Israel, rather they are to be supported by the community by a system of tithes. All divination is prohibited. Hashem promises the Jewish People that He will send them prophets to guide them, and Moshe explains how a genuine prophet may be distinguished from a false one. Cities of refuge are to be provided for someone who kills accidentally, in order to escape the blood-avenger from the family of the deceased. However, someone who kills with malice is to be handed over to the blood-avenger who may exact his revenge. Moshe cautions *Bnei Yisrael* not to move boundary markers to increase their property. Two witnesses who conspire to "frame" a third party are to be punished with that same punishment that they conspired to bring upon the innocent party. A *kohen* is to be anointed specifically for when Israel goes to war, to instill trust in Hashem. Amongst those who are disqualified from going to war is anyone who has built a new house but not lived in it yet, or anyone who is fearful or fainthearted. An enemy must be given the chance to make peace, but if they refuse, all the males are to be killed. Fruit trees are to be preserved and not cut down during the siege. If a corpse is found between cities, the elders of the nearest city must take a heifer, slaughter it, and wash their hands over it, saying that they are not guilty of the death.

Insights

WOMEN AND CHILDREN FIRST

"When you go out to the battle to meet your enemy...the officers shall speak to the people, saying: 'Who is the man who has built a new house and not inaugurated it? Let him go and return to his house, lest he die in the war and another man will inaugurate it. Who is the man who has planted a vineyard and not redeemed it? Let him go...lest he die in the war and another man redeem it. Who is the man who had betrothed a woman and not taken her to be his wife? Let him go...lest he die in the war another man take her....' " (20:1-8)

A dangerous mission behind enemy lines. Chance of coming back alive? Not more than 50/50. Who do you send? The single men, of course. If they die it will be a tragedy for their loved ones, but at least there will be no grief-stricken widows and orphans. So says conventional wisdom.

In this week's Parsha the Torah writes *"Who is the man who betrothed a woman and not taken her to be his wife? Let him go...lest he die in the war and another man take her...."* This means that an engaged man is exempt from the war but married men with children are sent out to battle.

Let's look at the other categories of military exemption:

"Who is the man who has built a new house and not inaugurated it? Let him go and return to his house, lest he die in the war and another man will inaugurate it." Rashi says that the reason is that he will be distressed that someone else will inaugurate it. Let me ask you a question: Does a person really care if someone else inaugurates a house that he never lived in? Shouldn't we be more concerned about someone who already has a house? Shouldn't we be concerned about the anguish he'll feel when he thinks that someone else will take it over?

Similarly regarding a spouse — isn't a person more likely to suffer distress at losing the wife that he

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already knows and loves rather than losing his fiancée with whom he hasn't yet bonded deeply?

The Torah is concerned here with the spiritual angst that we feel when we have started a mitzvah and we fear that we won't be able to complete it. When our soul sees a spiritual project about to be cut off in its prime, we experience great loss and sadness.

The three scenarios in the above verse each represent a spiritual project in progress: When we build a house, our soul knows that when we finish the building we will be able to do the mitzvah of making a parapet around the roof.

In the time of the Holy Temple, when we planted a vineyard, the soul longed for the fourth year when there would be the opportunity to bring up the produce to Jerusalem and eat it there in holiness and joy.

When we get engaged to someone, our soul yearns to fulfill the commandment to be fruitful, to multiply and bring children into the world.

The Torah is expressing here the longing of the soul. Not the longing of the body.

NO STONE UNTURNED

“Do not erect for yourself an altar of only one stone” (16:22)

“Organized religion” is one of those phrases which is guaranteed to bring distaste to the Western liberal sensitivity.

Being part of a group smacks of regimentation. A person educated in the “liberal enlightened” tradition is taught to cherish the moment alone with one's Creator in a field, on top of a hill, or under the stars.

To be sure, the individual communicating with his Creator not only finds a place in Judaism but is Judaism's bequest to the world. But there is another side to Divine worship. One that is much maligned and misunderstood — that of the entire group, the *klal*, and its Maker.

There are two kinds of altars. An altar made from a single block of stone and an altar made from many distinct stones. There are two kinds of Divine service — that of the individual and that of the *klal*. The single block represents the service of the individual; that of many stones represents the service of the complete group.

In this week's Parsha, we learn that the Torah forbids an altar consisting of only one stone. Even though in the days of the *Avos* (the fathers of the Jewish People) the single-stone altar was beloved,

subsequently however, it became the preferred method of idolatry and thus was no longer fitting for the service of G-d.

The Prophet Eliyahu erected an altar of 12 stones. Twelve is the number of the Tribes of Israel. The altar of 12 symbolizes the unity of the Jewish People in the service of G-d; the *klal* becoming like one person. The stones are separate but they join together and become the instrument through which Man can serve his Creator. The individual's desire finds its appropriate expression when channeled through this mystical “one person” who is the Jewish People.

Thus it was that the forefathers were able to build altars of only one stone. For they were the entire Jewish People in embryo. But once the Jewish People are “born” at Sinai, the service of the individual finds its proper fulfillment in making up the “one person” who is Israel.

The spiritual light that we receive in this world is radiated as a totality to all parts of Creation. There is no place which is devoid of Hashem's radiance. Thus, when we approach our Creator, it must be as a totality, joined like the stones of the altar. For with even one stone missing, there is no altar.

Sources:

Women And Children First - heard from Rabbi Yehuda Samet in the name of Rabbi Yisrael Rokowsky, based on the *Abarbanel*

No Stone Unturned - *Shem MiShmuel*, heard from Rabbi C. Z. Senter

Parshas *Shoftim*

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Haftorah: Yishayahu 51:12-52:12

WHERE ARE THEY NOW?

“Where then is the fury of the oppressor?”

These three words belong to the most sublime that have ever been uttered about the history of the Jewish People.

What has become of them? What has become of the Hamans and the Hitlers? What has become of the Romans and the Babylonians? What has become of them? For thousands of years, over and over again they have tried to smash the head of an Israel that they thought was lying defenseless on the ground. They didn't realize with Whom they were contending. They tried to smash us with the elephantine hoof of brutal violence but they themselves lie broken in ruins. And Israel stands as always, rescued by their G-d, maintained for their mission as a holy people and a light to the nations, at the forefront of every culture.

Rabbi Mendel Hirsch

COLD COMFORT

This is the fourth of the “Haftorahs of Consolation” after Tisha B'Av.

The prophet combines descriptions of oppression, the Jewish People trampled by the nations, with the comfort that Hashem is never far from them and will save them.

Our Sages teach that in the future when *Mashiach* comes, Hashem will turn to the nations of the world to comfort Israel. Israel will immediately come and complain that after such a long and hard exile full of trials and tribulations, couldn't Hashem find anybody else to comfort us besides those same nations that enslaved and oppressed us? Hashem will reply that if we will accept consolation only from Him — then He will console us.

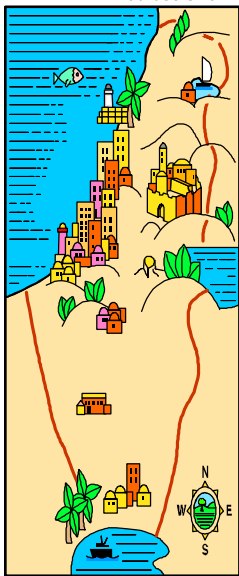
In fact, this whole dialogue is played out in the opening lines of this and the three previous Haftorahs of consolation:

In *Parshas Vaeschanan*: “Comfort, be of comfort My people...” To which Israel replies in the Haftorah of *Parshas Eikev*: “Hashem has forsaken me, My Lord has forsaken me,” by sending the nations to comfort us; to which Hashem replies in the Haftorah of *Parshas Re'eh*: “Oh afflicted, storm-tossed, unconsolated one” — if you are unconsolated by the nations and will accept consolation only from Me, then “It is I, I who comfort you.”

Rabbi Meir Shapiro of Lublin

LOVE OF THE LAND

Selections from classical Torah sources which express the special relationship between the People of Israel and Eretz Yisrael



WHAT'S IN A NAME

“Malki-Tzedek, King of Shalem, brought out bread and wine” (Bereishis 14:18) “Avraham called that place Hashem Yireh” (Bereishis 22:14)

Both of these saintly men — Malki-Tzedek, who was Shem, son of Noach, and his descendant Avraham — were referring to the site upon which stands Jerusalem (whose Biblical name is *Yirehshalem*).

When Hashem wished to name His holy city, He faced, as it were, a Divine dilemma.

“If I call it *Yireh* like Avraham did, the righteous Shem will feel slighted, and if I call it *Shalem* like Shem did, the righteous Avraham will feel slighted. I will therefore call it *Yireh-Shalem* like both of them called it.”

Shaleim means both peace and perfection, while *Yireh*, as *Targum Onkelos* translates, means human service of Hashem. Only when man serves Hashem can he hope to achieve the peace and perfection symbolized by *Yirehshalem*.

Bereishis Rabbah 56:10

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