

Beit Hamidrash Hameir Laarets | Issue 226

**Shoftim** | Between Truths and Lies



# MESILOT

## *Pathways to the Soul*

Illuminating teachings and insights on the weekly Parsha  
of **Rabbi Yoram Michael Abargel Zt"l**

From the weekly lessons of his son  
**Rabbi Yisrael Abargel Shlita**

פרשת שופטים | אנגלית

# ...PATHWAYS TO THE SOUL...

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# **Parshat Shoftim**

## **The Great Innovation of Mussar**

The "Zichron Moshe" synagogue in Jerusalem is one of the most famous in the Jewish world, primarily because of the many distinguished figures who have graced it over the years; many of Jerusalem's great and righteous individuals have prayed within its walls.

One day, two noted pious men — Rabbi Velvel Tchetchik and Rabbi Nota Tzainvirt — stood at the entrance to the synagogue, talking.

Rabbi Velvel told Rabbi Nota the following story:<sup>1</sup>

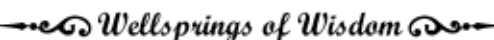
In a small town in Lithuania, there lived a pauper who was a shoemaker's apprentice, widely known around town as "der latshuster" (the patcher). One day, fortune shone upon him — he received an inheritance from a

distant relative, and in one fell swoop, he went from being greatly impoverished to being exceedingly wealthy.

As is often the case, the money brought with it influence; with his newfound wealth and elevated stature, he climbed the communal ranks until he was chosen to serve as the head of the town's community council.

After some time, he successfully arranged his son's match with the daughter of the town rabbi, and the wedding day, when he led his son to the chuppah together with the rabbi, was the height and apex of his happiness.

But one of the local shoemakers took no pleasure in the scene unfolding before him; it unsettled him to see the longtime



1. 'Chaim Sheyesh Bahem' (p. 112). See also 'Tenuat HaMussar' (Vol. 1, p. 168).

assistant — once no more than a lowly shoemaker's helper — now so wealthy and influential, leading his son to the wedding canopy alongside the rabbi.

In his envy, the shoemaker rose from the crowd amid the chuppah ceremony, turned to the jubilant father of the groom, and brandished a torn shoe in his hand. Waving the shoe, he called out loudly, "der latshutsher (the patcher), perhaps you can patch up this shoe for me? How many coins would you charge for it?"

At those words, he turned pale as chalk. His face drained of all color, and in an instant the joyful expression of the community leader vanished. His knees buckled and his hands trembled.

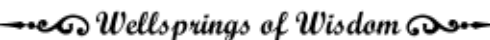
Overcome with shame, he fell backward in a faint. Pandemonium broke out as they tried to revive the groom's father, but it was all to no avail.

A doctor was summoned and declared that the man had passed away on the spot — his spirit had fled from him out of profound humiliation and grief; the festive wedding was transformed into deep mourning.

When news of the incident reached Rabbi Yisrael Salanter, he was shaken to his core and said:

"I have no doubt that the great luminaries of the previous generation, who are seated in Gan Eden, are being judged because of this incident — for not having taught people ethics and proper character traits; for not having trained them so that such ruinous events would be negated."

From that time onward, he decided to devote his life to spreading the ideas and teachings of Mussar — the moral-ethical discipline. It is indeed incumbent upon every Jew to learn works of Mussar.<sup>2</sup>



2. Including well-known works, such as Mesillat Yesharim, Orchot Tzaddikim, and Sha'arei Teshuvah.

**Parshat Shoftim - The Great Innovation of Mussar**

Rabbi Yisrael continued in this path and later established a special beit midrash dedicated to the study of Mussar, known as the “Beit HaMussar.”

Rabbi Nota heard the whole background of the Mussar movement's founding and, marveling at the whole episode, responded:

“The measure of maliciousness in this tale is quite extreme; it's practically unheard of.

Was it necessary to start a whole revolution — founding a Beit HaMussar — just because of one individual's twisted character trait that is so rare that hardly anyone would ever sink to such depths of cruelty?

Does one truly need ‘character refinement’ for that? Most ordinary people would never in their lives commit such a horrific humiliation. Was the tremendous undertaking of the ‘Beit HaMussar’ founded because of this?”

"There's no other explanation," Rabbi Nota said after giving the matter some thought, "other than this":

Yes, the Beit HaMussar was established following that particular incident, but it was not because of the one who did the humiliating. It was because of the one who was humiliated. He died from shame — and he is the one who must contend with a major accusation.

Think about it: He had money — he was wealthy.

He had honor — he was the head of the Jewish community.

He even had the good fortune to become related by marriage to the town's honored rabbi. If life was so good for him, if he should have been so blissfully happy, why then was he so shaken by the words of the lowly shoemaker? Why faint and fall dead over an ignorant remark that took nothing away from him? Why did he die over it? He should have-on the contrary-danced with the shoe in hand, thanking G-d for raising him from rags to riches.

All this stemmed from the person's inability to control himself — his intellect and mind had gone away on vacation,

## Parshat Shoftim - The Great Innovation of Mussar

and he was ruled entirely by his emotions.

“Indeed,” concluded Rabbi Nota with his penetrating insight, “it’s precisely this

disturbing phenomenon of ‘losing one’s self-control’ that necessitates the founding of many Batei Mussar.”<sup>3</sup>

So ends our story.

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### Wellsprings of Wisdom

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3. Rabbi Yaakov Galinsky recounted (‘Vehigad’ta, Bereshit, p. 134), as follows:

When Rabbi Yisrael Salanter founded the Mussar movement, great Torah and G-d-fearing scholars opposed it, and they each had their reasons.

Many of them believed that Mussar was simply one of the many facets of the Torah, and never before had anyone created a movement around a specific mitzvah or a desirable personal practice — no matter how commendable.

Rabbi Yisrael Salanter strongly disagreed. He argued that studying Mussar is not just another mitzvah; it is the foundation upon which a Jew’s entire spiritual life stands. A Jew who does not set aside daily time to refine his character and elevate his inner self — will not endure in Torah learning or mitzvah observance.

In order to have his words taken with the proper seriousness, he invested great effort into establishing his halachic and Torah authority. As one of the generation’s greats, he toured the communities of Lithuania and astounded scholars with his intricate Talmudic analyses — lengthy lectures that wove together half the Talmud.

His custom was unique: he would arrive in a town, enter the study hall, and hang a notice stating that in two days, Rabbi Yisrael Salanter would deliver a lecture on a specific Talmudic topic, with tens of listed sources from the Talmud, and early and later commentators.

After all, it’s no great feat to deliver a complex lecture on a topic that the local scholars haven’t prepared. If they aren’t familiar with the sugyah, they won’t appreciate the depth of the questions or the brilliance of the offered solutions.

Over those two days, the scholars would study the sources and become well-versed. Then, he would ascend the podium and weave all of the sources into a single, elegant structure — to their amazement and admiration. In this way, his towering Torah greatness was recognized, and his leadership accepted. Thus, the Mussar movement took firm roots — much to the dismay of its opponents.

Once, he arrived in a certain city, hung up his source sheet, and retired to his lodgings to study. Two young scholars, who were the students of one of the noted opponents to Mussar, realized that Rabbi Yisrael was likely to win over the crowd with his Torah

**Parshat Shoftim - The Great Innovation of Mussar**

genius, and so they did the unthinkable: they secretly took down the source sheet and replaced it with another — on the same topic, but with 30 unrelated sources.

The scholars of the city soon copied the sources and began reviewing them — only to be baffled. The topic was familiar, but none of the usual sources were listed. Instead, entirely unrelated Talmudic texts were cited. Perhaps, they thought, this rabbi is such a great genius that he can somehow connect them into a grand masterpiece, and so they studied the sources and awaited the lecture.

At the appointed time, the study hall was packed. Rabbi Yisrael ascended the steps to the ark and was handed the source sheet. When he glanced at it, his face turned pale.

The two scheming scholars who sat in the crowd smiled with satisfaction, convinced that his downfall was imminent and that the Mussar movement would suffer a crushing blow — at least in their town.

Rabbi Yisrael stood silently for one, then two minutes; the audience grew restless. Then — he began to speak, and with astounding genius, piercing sharpness, and astonishing knowledge, he stood and delivered a dazzling Torah discourse, weaving all 30 irrelevant sources into a brilliant and cohesive Talmudic structure.

The crowd was beside itself, such brilliance they had never seen before. They were certain this was the lecture he had prepared previously.

Among the crowd, the two young unscrupulous men turned pale. They realized they had deeply wronged a Torah giant and that they needed to receive his forgiveness.

But just when Rabbi Yisrael completed the final strand of his intricate web of logic — he fainted.

The two students were sure that they knew exactly why he had collapsed: the intense intellectual and emotional strain of constructing such a lecture on the spot surely drained all of the energy and stamina from him.

Panic erupted in the large study hall that was packed, and eventually Rabbi Yisrael was revived.

When he awoke, they immediately asked and begged for his forgiveness.

“For what?” he asked curiously.

They confessed to their actions which had led to his fainting, and pleaded for his pardon.

He answered them, “For the act you committed, you indeed need my forgiveness — it was wrong, and I indeed forgive you.

But if your conscience troubles you because you think I fainted because of you — let me reassure you, that’s not why I fainted.”

His disciple Rabbi Itchele Blazer testified that Rabbi Yisrael stood silent for those two minutes — not because he needed time to construct the lecture — but because he debated whether to deliver it

## Parshat Shoftim - The Theme of Parshat Shoftim

Now, although Rabbi Nota's claim — that such cruelty is rare — may indeed be correct, it is also equally rare for a person to die from humiliation.

Thus, the original question still stands: Why did Rabbi Yisrael

Salanter establish a Beit HaMussar over a case whose tragic outcome clearly was not intended by the one who inflicted it? On what basis was all of this done?

Before answering this, let us first give a brief introduction.

### The Theme of Parshat Shoftim

This week, we read Parshat Shoftim — a Torah portion that, for the most part, focuses on one central issue:

the leadership of the Jewish people.

We bring an excerpt from Rabbi Yitzchak Ginsburgh:<sup>4</sup>

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#### *Wellsprings of Wisdom*

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at all. Was it out of pure intentions, or was there a trace of pride in his heart? Was it truly for the sake of Heaven and to bolster and promote the Mussar movement?

Ultimately he decided to deliver it.

As for the reason that he fainted, Rabbi Yisrael explained:

"Know this — Heaven does not give one merely gifts, but rather missions and the tools to fulfill them. If one is wealthy, he must honor G-d with his wealth. A singer honors G-d with his voice. Every talent is given to man in order to be used to serve the Al-mighty.

I always knew I had the mental capabilities of scores of scholars, and thus, I was required to achieve the work of myriads of

Torah scholars. Indeed, I learned, I taught, I inspired, and I led — with tireless strength and unmatched dedication.

But this kind of feat — I didn't know that I was able to accomplish. I had never before tried to prepare, in an instant, a full Torah lecture out of thin air, to know completely what each source says and to connect them all — seamlessly. That normally requires the hours of diligence of many scholars. And the fact that this has always been possible for me to do means that I haven't fulfilled the potential that G-d demands of me. That's why I fainted.

Because when I stand in Heaven, they will ask me: Why were you given such powers?

What did you accomplish with them?"

**4.** 'Ma'ayan Ganim' (Devarim, p. 55).



**Parshat Shoftim - The Theme of Parshat Shoftim**

“Parshat Shoftim is, in a very distinct way, the most public-oriented Torah portion, describing the entire structure of Jewish governance.

It is a Torah portion about ‘the leaders’ whose shoulders bear the full and encompassing responsibility of public administration, where even the simplest aspects of daily life — material life — are also meant to be guided by Torah.

Notably, there is the mitzvah of appointing a king, which addresses the public administration of an entire nation ‘like all the nations’ (Deuteronomy 17:14) - in all spheres of life (not just private religious practice, personal ethics, or sanctity of the individual).

The mitzvah to appoint a king is truly a utopian one since the fulfillment of this precept provides an opening and the hope for achieving all of the Jewish people's goals, including the building of the holy Temple.

Beyond that, the entire Torah portion of Shoftim deals with, as its name indicates, the

governmental bodies necessary to properly manage a Jewish state:

-Judges and enforcement officers — systems of justice and law enforcement.

-Kohanim, Levites, and prophets — spiritual leadership.

-A king — the political and governmental leader who ensures that all of the systems run properly and that the national objectives are carried out.

The rest of the Torah portion's topics also connect to the proper functioning of a sovereign Jewish state: cities of refuge and the laws of murder (removing murderers is a primary function of the king, for ‘if not for fear of the monarchy, people would swallow each other alive’), rules of warfare and the roles of the anointed priest, the officers, and the commanders.

Finally, at our Torah portion’s conclusion, we have the laws of the ‘Eglah Arufah’ (the ritual of the beheaded calf), the responsibility over which falls upon the elders of the city — who bear local

## Parshat Shoftim - Justice, You Shall Pursue

spiritual and legal accountability for what happens in and around their city.”<sup>5</sup>

Since this indeed is the Torah portion’s theme, it is most fittingly called “Parshat Shoftim.”

### Justice, You Shall Pursue

When the Torah commands us to appoint judges, it continues and teaches us what kind of person a judge ought to be. It says the following:

"Justice, justice you shall pursue, so that you may live and inherit the land that the L-rd your G-d gives you" (Deuteronomy 16:20).

Rabbeinu Ovadia Sforno explains that when selecting a

judge, the primary quality we must seek is his connection to the trait of truth.

In his holy words:

“Justice, justice you shall pursue” – when you appoint judges, you who appoint them to their positions, choose those who are the most just — even if they somewhat lack other qualities typically desirable in a judge, such as intellectual completeness

### Wellsprings of Wisdom

5. The Sefer HaChinuch (Mitzvah 491) writes:

"The 491st mitzvah is the obligation to appoint judges and officers in every Jewish community, whose role it is to enforce the commandments of the Torah and to return those who stray from the path of truth, through force if necessary. They are to instruct people regarding what is proper and prevent them from that which is shameful and to uphold the boundaries of the law so that the Torah's commandments are not left to the personal beliefs of each individual.

Through this system, our religion is upheld when the awe of our leaders and judges rests upon the public.

As people become accustomed to goodness and righteousness due to fear, they will eventually act justly and truthfully out of love — through recognition of the true path.

As our sages say: “Great habit becomes second nature.” Just as nature compels a person to pursue its will, so too, strong habits become like a fixed nature and compel a person to follow the path of routine.

When the people shall walk in paths of righteousness and faith and choose good, goodness will cleave to them — and G-d will rejoice in His works.”

**Parshat Shoftim - Justice, You Shall Pursue**

or physical perfection. As it says: “Do not look at his appearance or his tall stature” (I Samuel 16:7).

Before we continue, we must pause and ask an important question, and to better frame the question, let us first cite the words of my father, Rabbi Yoram Abargel, who said the following (Imrei Noam, Parshat Shemot, Discourse 8):

The first time G-d revealed Himself to Moses, Moses was tending the flocks of his father-in-law Yitro in the desert. It was then that G-d appointed him to lead the redemption of the Jewish people from Pharaoh, king of Egypt.

In this context, Moses asked G-d:

“When I come to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The G-d of your fathers has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is His name?’ what shall I say to them?” (Exodus 3:13).

G-d replies:

"Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh — 'I Will Be What I Will Be' - Thus shall you

say to the children of Israel: 'Ehyeh has sent me to you.'" (Exodus 3:14).

We are left to wonder: Among all of G-d's sacred names — The Tetragrammaton, Sha-ddai, Elokim — why does He tell Moses to relay specifically the name Ehyeh? And why the doubling: “Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh”?

To understand this, we must turn to the words of the Orchot Tzaddikim (Gate 23 – The Gate of Truth), who writes:

“It is written: ‘Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh,’ and it is also written: ‘The L-rd G-d is true, He is the living G-d and the eternal King’ (Jeremiah 10:10).

Know this: G-d is a G-d of Truth — and likewise the name Ehyeh, when you multiply Ehyeh (21) by Ehyeh (21), you get 441, which is the gematria of Emet (truth).”

From his holy words we learn that the phrase “Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh” symbolizes G-d's attribute of truth, and therefore, in telling Moses “Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh,” G-d asked Moses to convey to the Jewish people that

**Parshat Shoftim - Justice, You Shall Pursue**

His core and most essential trait is truth, as it says, “The L-rd G-d is truth” (Jeremiah 10:10), and as our Sages say (Shabbat 55a), “The seal of G-d is truth.”

That is why G-d revealed this name specifically — to teach us and say: “My dear children, the pillar upon which everything rests is the pillar of truth.”

In contrast, the most destructive force that severs our connection with G-d is falsehood, as it says: “Keep far from a false matter” (Exodus 23:7).

Rabbi Zusha of Anipoli explains that even one utterance of falsehood distances and removes a person to be entirely far from G-d.

In the World to Come, a liar will not stand before G-d, as it says: “He who speaks lies shall not stand before My eyes” (Psalms 101:7).

We see this idea illustrated in the story of Ahab (I Kings 22):

G-d wanted Ahab to go to war against Aram and be killed,

so He asked the celestial assembly, “Who will entice Ahab so that he may go and fall in Ramoth-Gilead?”

A spirit came forth and said, “I will entice him.” G-d asked, “How?” The spirit replied, “I will be a lying spirit in the mouths of all of his prophets.”

G-d answered, “You will entice him and succeed. Go out and do so.”

Our Sages (Shabbat 149a) explain that this spirit was the soul of Naboth the Jezreelite, whom Ahab had murdered years earlier to take possession of his vineyard. Naboth now saw an opportunity to avenge his wrongful death.

However, since Naboth’s plan was to incite false prophecy, G-d said to him: “Go out” — that is, “Depart from My presence,” because G-d does not allow liars to dwell near Him.

Thus, when G-d said “Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh” to Moses, He was revealing to him His full glory and character of truth, and from that moment on, Moses became the

**Parshat Shoftim - The Truth-Seeking King Solomon**

epitome of truth — a level no human before or after has ever attained.

The trait of truth embodies Moses to the extent that "Moshe

and his Torah are truth" (Bava Batra 74a), i.e., he is known as being - together with the Torah - an existence of truth.

**The Truth-Seeking King Solomon**

Several generations later, during the reign of King Solomon, the Gemara (Rosh Hashanah 21b) tells us that Solomon prayed and begged G-d to make him akin to Moses, but a heavenly voice replied:

"The words of the wise are pleasant truths" (Ecclesiastes 12:10), "No prophet has arisen in Israel like Moses" (Deuteronomy 34:10).

Now, surely this doesn't mean that Solomon wanted to match Moses in wisdom — for regarding Solomon's wisdom, it is written:

"G-d gave Solomon wisdom and great understanding, and breadth of heart like the sand on the seashore; and he was wiser than all men: wiser than Ethan the Ezrahite, Heman, Calcol, Darda, the sons of Machol." (I Kings 5:9–11).

The Sages (Midrash Tanchuma, Chukat 6) interpret:

"Wiser than all men" – even more than Adam;

"Ethan the Ezrahite" – is Abraham;

"Heman" – is Moses;

"Calcol" – is Joseph;

"Darda" – refers to the generation of the wilderness, who were known for their great intellect.

Thus, Solomon was indeed wiser than Moses.

Solomon rather was asking not for wisdom, but for Moses's attribute of truth.

This is hinted at in the verse that says that Solomon "spoke 3,000 proverbs" (I Kings 5:12).

The number 3,000 alludes to the three distinct letters that make up the name of אֵהְיֶה (Ehyeh), the divine source of Moses's truth.

**Parshat Shoftim - The Truth-Seeking King Solomon**

This expressed King Solomon's deepest yearning; Solomon understood that being the wisest man did not necessitate him being a man of truth; on the contrary — extremely clever people sometimes lean toward cunning and scheming. As it says: "I, wisdom, dwell with cunning" (Proverbs 8:12), and as Rashi explains: Once a person learns Torah, subtlety and craftiness enter him.

A perfect example of this is Korah. The Midrash (Tanchuma, Korach 5) says, "Korah was a clever individual."

The very fact that he led a rebellion against Moses together with 250 heads of Sanhedrin — "princes of the assembly, renowned men" (Numbers 16:2) — shows how influential and intelligent he was.

But because he was clever, he veered off the path of truth; he ultimately denied G-d and His Torah, inventing his own ideas in place of what Moses received directly from G-d.

And what was his ignoble end? The earth opened its mouth and

swallowed him and all that he had. Till this very day, he is cast into the lowest depths, and each new month, he is brought back from Gehinnom and cries out with regret: "Moses and his Torah are truth, and we are liars" (Bava Batra 74a).

Another example is Yeravam, son of Nebat. He lived during the time of Solomon and his son Rehavam.

Our Sages (Sanhedrin 102a) say something astonishing about Yeravam:

"Compared to him, all of the Torah scholars appeared to be no more than mere weeds in the field."

The title used here — "Torah scholars" — does not refer to scholars of our generation's caliber but rather to those like King Solomon himself. Nonetheless, when compared to Yeravam, they were compared to mere grass. We can only imagine the immense wisdom he must have possessed.

Yet even so — or perhaps because of it — Yeravam veered

from truth; He denied G-d and His Torah, invented a new festival (I Kings 12:32–33), and in the end he sinned and caused others to sin (Pirkei Avot 5:18), losing all and any share of the World to Come (Sanhedrin 90a).

For this reason, Solomon didn't rely on his wisdom alone. He pleaded with G-d from the depths of his heart to let him become a man of truth like Moses and to never deviate right or left. And because King Solomon clung tightly to the truth, he was granted the highest form of kingship — as it says:

“Solomon sat on the throne of G-d as king” (I Chronicles 29:23), meaning he ruled over the heavenly and earthly realms — thus, his kingship resembled G-d's very own.

In Summary:

G-d is a G-d of truth; His seal is truth, His Torah is truth, and falsehoods are utterly foreign to Him.

Therefore, anyone who wishes to cling to G-d — and thereby merit constant divine protection

— must adhere to truth in every step of life.

One must not perform even a single false action or utter even one word of deceit. One who veers toward falsehood separates himself from G-d.

If a person, G-d forbid, experiences a period of divine concealment — repeated failures in business, conflict at home, troubles with children, and endless suffering — he should examine and ask himself: Who have I lied to lately?

Maybe he sold a car or a house to a naïve buyer and hid from them major flaws. Maybe he reported false information to government offices to receive money he wasn't entitled to. Maybe he lied to his wife and withheld critical information she was privileged to. Maybe he set up a couple to marry but concealed serious health issues of one party to get his matchmaking fee.

These are just a few common examples of daily occurrences of dishonesty. A person must realize

## **Parshat Shoftim - The Book of 'Judges'**

that by clinging to lies, he severs or at least weakens his connection to G-d, and he becomes removed from being under divine watch and instead sustains concealment.

The only way to restore divine supervision is to rid himself of lies — immediately.

Rabbi Nachman of Breslov, of blessed memory, writes (Sefer HaMiddot, "Truth," section 21):

"It is better for a person to die than to be a liar."

If a person is faced with two choices — to tell lies and to live, or tell the truth and die — one must choose to die as a man of truth rather than live as a liar. For when

one dies having lived by the truth, he will merit eternal attachment to G-d in the World to Come.

But if he lives deceitfully, he will never enter G-d's presence for all eternity.

Now, after all this, we return and pose the following question:

Every Jew is obligated to pursue truth. Thus, naturally, a judge — who is also a Jew — is obligated to do so as well. Why, then, does the Torah issue a special commandment to judges:

"Justice, justice you shall pursue" (Deuteronomy 16:20)?

Before we answer this question, let us turn to the Book of Judges.

## **The Book of 'Judges'**

We have previously explained that this week's Torah portion is called Parshat Shoftim ("Judges"), and its theme is the system of leadership within the nation of Israel. In addition, the Torah portion opens with the word "Shoftim" ("Judges"), and it therefore bears that name.

In the Tanach as well, we also have an entire book titled Sefer Shoftim — the Book of Judges — and it begins with the verse:

"And it came to pass after the death of Joshua, that the children of Israel inquired of G-d, saying: Who shall go up for us first against the Canaanites, to fight against them?" (Judges 1:1)



Parshat Shoftim - The Inner Soul's Essence

The reason this book is called Shoftim is encapsulated in verses in chapter 2, where we read:

“And the children of Israel did evil in the eyes of G-d... And they forsook the L-rd, the G-d of their fathers... and served Baal and the Ashtaroth, and the anger of G-d flared against Israel.

And G-d raised up judges, who saved them from the hand of those that devoured them... And whenever G-d raised up judges for them, G-d was with the judge, and He saved them out of the hands of their enemies all of the days of the judge”  
(Judges 2:11–18).

From these verses, it becomes clear that the role of the judges in

Sefer Shoftim was to save and rescue the people.

Let us pause to clarify:

The term "Shofet," as it is used in Parshat Shoftim, refers to a dayan (judge) whose role is to examine and rule on legal matters. Indeed, the Targum Onkelos translates "Shoftim" in our Torah portion as "Dayanim."

However, the term “Shofet” in Sefer Shoftim means a savior of the Jewish people — as is evident in the above verses:

“Judges, who saved them...”  
“...The judge, and He saved them.”

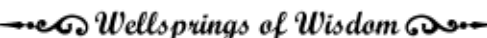
Understanding this dual meaning helps us grasp a key distinction between the two types of ‘Shoftim.’

## The Inner Soul's Essence

In a discourse by Rabbi Yitzchak Ginsburgh, he said the following:<sup>6</sup>

“The redemption we await is not merely a vision of the future,

near or far away, but an actual reality that exists even now. Within every Jew, in the divine spark beating inside one's soul, redemption already resides.



6. ‘Lichyot Im HaZman’ (Devarim – p. 123).

The soul of Mashiach is the collective “Yechidah” (singular essence) of all Jewish souls, and his light rises and is the collective of all of the personal yechidah levels that exist within each one of us.<sup>7</sup>

The yechidah is the deepest and most hidden core of our being, and it encompasses the spark of the Divine above that lies in the innermost point of our hearts. There, deep inside, it is clear and palpably felt that “G-d is One and His Name is One” (Zechariah 14:9) — a recognition of absolute Divine unity, the 50th and highest gate of holiness.

Hence, the verse states:

“My heart has said: ‘Seek My face’” (Psalms 27:8) — we must seek the inner face of the Jewish soul — for it reflects the ultimate unity with G-d.

But how can one reach this inner essence?

Only through the power of compassion — for it is the attribute that is directly associated with the Divine Essence. The divine name corresponding to this attribute is the ineffable Tetragrammaton, which is referred to as G-d’s Essential Name.

People tend to live in judgment — they constantly judge and claim to understand and also blame others, themselves, and even G-d. This perpetual judging yields harsh outcomes:

‘Others are inconsiderate;’  
‘G-d is neglectful and unfair;’ ‘I am a failure and can’t even live up to my own expectations.’

Outwardly, this might seem like an expression of truth, integrity, or courage, but in fact, it reflects immature judgment.

We often tend to evaluate people from our own perspective without truly entering or comprehending their reality.

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*~ Wellsprings of Wisdom ~*

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7. The soul of every Jew comprises five parts (in ascending order): Nefesh, Ruach, Neshamah, Chayah, and Yechidah.

Through the spiritual work of the individual, these powers are actualized and brought forth from the potential into reality.

**Parshat Shoftim - Advocating Jews' Merit in the Period of the Judges**

If someone's actions inconvenience me, I declare them guilty. If G-d doesn't shower me with blessings to the degree and in the way that I see fit, I judge Him too; if I fall short of my ideals, I deem myself unworthy.

But true compassion demands that we exit our narrow vantage point and enter the other's world. We must internalize their story, not just judge them based on the facts visible to us.

On this kind of deep empathy, the Mishnah says:

"Better is one who is slow to anger than a mighty warrior" (Avot 4:1). This can also be read thus:

Not only is patience greater than power and strength but

rather, the patience that is awakened and reins in the great power of strength is the true and exalted virtue. This kind of inner mastery is greater than any external force.

Such sensitivity is demanded from the Jewish Judges and enforcers of justice of yore — those who strive to render a "just ruling" (mishpat tzedek) must show compassion and mercy and liberate the Jewish people from their bonds of inner and outer exile in which they may be bound.

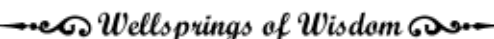
Only judges of this high caliber — who can see past the surface and reach deep and touch the soul — can truly sacrifice themselves and save others.

**Advocating Jews' Merit in the Period of the Judges**

Rabbi Moshe Yechiel Epstein wrote as follows:<sup>8</sup>

"Know that it is the will of the Holy One,

blessed be He, that we advocate merit and plead for compassion upon the Jewish people.



8. 'Be'er Moshe' (Melachim – p. 261).

Moreover, even upon sinners and those deserving punishment, G-d desires merit to be advocated and mercy requested.

Thus, when a righteous individual advocates merit for the Jewish people, G-d derives great satisfaction, and when such a person departs from the world, G-d deeply grieves.

During the period of the Judges, several righteous individuals advocated merit for the Jewish people and thereby succeeded in bringing salvation.

We can name a few examples:

1. Regarding Othniel ben Kenaz, it is stated: "The spirit of G-d came upon him" (Judges 3:10) because "he judged Israel" — meaning that he advocated merit for them.

2. In the days of Gideon ben Joash, the Jewish people were in distress, and G-d sought someone who would advocate merit for them but found none, for that generation sorely lacked mitzvot and good deeds. When merits were found by Gideon, who

advocated on their behalf, an angel immediately appeared to him, as it says: "G-d turned to him and said: 'Go with this strength of yours and save the people of Israel'" (Judges 6:14) — 'with this strength,' referring to the strength of the merits of having advocated on behalf of G-d's children.

What merits of the Jewish people did Gideon advocate?

He did not seek out good deeds nor deny the severity of their situation. Rather, he evoked G-d's compassion and kindness by emphasizing that we are His people, His flock, and His children.

As Rashi explains (Judges 6:13), it was Passover, and Gideon said to the angel: "Last night my father recited the Hallel, and I heard him say: 'When Israel went forth from Egypt.' Yet now He has abandoned us.

If our ancestors were righteous, let Him save us in their merit, and if they were wicked, let Him perform miracles for us as well, as He did for them — '

**Parshat Shoftim - Truly Recognizing Others**

where are all His wonders?' Where are the miracles G-d performed for our ancestors on this very night when He smote the firstborn of Egypt and joyfully brought out his people – Israel?"

3. Furthermore, we find that when the high priest Eli failed to judge Hannah favorably, she responded: "No, my L-rd" (1

Samuel 1:15) – which our Sages expound to mean (Berachot 31b): "You are neither a master nor does the Divine spirit rest upon you, being that you suspect me of wrongdoing." For without advocating merit upon others, the Divine spirit is not properly expressed and has lessened significance.

**Truly Recognizing Others**

Indeed, in order to acquire this tremendous virtue — the virtue of judging others favorably — one must toil for it with great power of both soul and body, for it does not come by easily.

Its beginning — the beginning of the spiritual work of judging others favorably — depends on an inner acceptance, a soul-level acknowledgment, that the individual standing before me is a real existence, a complete and worthy living being endowed with intellect and emotion.

Do not take this lightly, for one who feels that the person before him is an authentic and

complete being with worthy thoughts and feelings will never be capable of causing them discouragement or sorrow.

In this connection we bring an excerpt from the writings of Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler ('Michtav M'Eliyahu,' vol. 5, letter 19):

"The Ramban wrote, regarding the verse "And Esau despised the birthright" (Genesis 25:34): "Cruelty is the result of contempt."

It is widely known that a wild animal will not attack a human unless it perceives him to be a beast.

Thus, those who made use of slaves did so because they

**Parshat Shoftim - Truly Recognizing Others**

viewed them as being lowly subhuman creatures.

Thus, it is possible to be cruel only when one first nullifies the others in his heart. Likewise, it is impossible to deceive or lie before one internally negates the other person.

When one erases and blots out the other person in his heart and considers him as though he does not exist at all, he can then treat him deceitfully, and communicate to him information that is not real.

This is how falsehood is born from arrogance: when one becomes arrogant, his lies begin.

In contrast, one who is united with his fellow in true love cannot deceive him.

A person steals only when he treats his fellow as being worth nothing and, by extension, his fellow's property as being valued as nothing.

This, then, is how the commandment to "Love your neighbor as yourself" is the

fundamental principle upon which all of the Torah depends.

Separation from others and falsehoods are one and the same; they are two sides of the same coin; it is through separation that one builds oneself up and nullifies others, believing that the other's existence is false.

By extension, one thereby denies the Holy One, G-d forbid, for in the depths of his heart, he sees only himself and nothing else.

However, recognition of the true existence of G-d depends on nullifying the ego, for only then is one not separate, but rather cleaves to Him."

After this lengthy explanation, let us clarify the point of distinction between the two 'Judges' we mentioned above:

A 'judge' in the first definition, in our Torah portion, is one who sees reality according to its external appearances and, based on that data, renders the necessary ruling and judgment.

**Parshat Shoftim - Judging and Penetrating Beyond the Surface**

However, a ‘judge’ in the second definition is one who succeeds in penetrating beyond the image, to enter into the emotional world of the one standing before him, and there, to observe and understand.

However, although the "Judges" in our Torah portion are

the legal arbiters and dayanim, the Torah continues and demands that these judges not be superficial people; they must be judges who know how to penetrate into the inner reality of their fellow Jews.

Thus, the Torah commands: "Justice, justice you shall pursue" (Deuteronomy 16:20).

**Judging and Penetrating Beyond the Surface**

Let us now return to the previous question we asked:

Every Jew is commanded to uphold the attribute of truth, and certainly, a Jewish judge is obligated to do so no less. Why then does the Torah add a specific command for judges: "Justice, justice you shall pursue"?

The answer is clear: Judges pass judgment on the person before them and are therefore required to feel and sense their emotions.

They must not settle for merely clarifying cold, external facts but must delve inward into their individual and emotional

inner world and apply and define "truths" from "falsehoods" based upon these inner truths.

Here, we must emphasize: ultimately, the halachic rulings of a Jewish judge must be made in accordance with the Shulchan Aruch only.

But when a judge delves deep within and peers into the inner elements of matters, they may uncover and reveal new aspects of reality that shed fresh light on the entire case that is presented to them.

As Rabbi Yosef Chaim writes ('Od Yosef Chai,' Drushim, Parshat Shoftim):

In our Torah portion, it says: "Justice, justice you shall pursue," and we must understand:

1. Why does it repeat the word justice? In other words, what is gained by repetition?

2. The verse says "pursue," which typically implies chasing to reject or destroy — as in: "Five of you shall pursue a hundred, and a hundred of you shall pursue ten thousand" (Leviticus 26:8). Thus, in most places it is used, "pursuit" refers to opposition, the opposite of connection and unity.

So what is the meaning of this term's use here?

Rather, the answer is that there are indeed two types of justice:

There is the usual justice which must be meted out and upheld when the outer world of occurrences aligns with the inner world within them.

But there is also justice which, although factually true, must be pushed aside and rejected, because the inner world requires a different approach or ruling.

To quote his holy words:

"Indeed, a person must cleave to truth and justice and distance himself from lies and falsehood.

However, there are situations where, just as one must distance himself from lies, so too must he distance himself from the plain type of truth — as our Sages have taught (Bava Metzia 87a): 'One may deviate from the truth for the sake of peace,' which does not merely mean that one has permission, but that they rather have an obligation.

In fact, in such a case, if one, out of a sense of piety, does not deviate from the plain truth, he is a 'pious fool,' and he in fact is a transgressor by not deviating from the truth as necessary."

## **Altering the Truth For the Sake of Peace**

Rabbi Yosef Chaim continues:

Parshat Vayera (in the Book of Genesis) opens with Avraham

Avinu experiencing pain on the third day after his circumcision. G-d wished to ease his suffering



and not burden him with the mitzvah of hospitality, which was so dear to him, and therefore, He removed the sun from 'its sheath' and heated the world so that no man ventured outside.

Indeed, that is what happened; the roads were deserted by travelers.

But Avraham, who was seized and entirely consumed by the greatest degree of the divine attribute of kindness, did not despair.

He sat at the entrance of his tent, seeking guests.

G-d saw his great distress and sent him three angels disguised as wandering Arabs, and Avraham fulfilled the mitzvah of hospitality for them with great splendor and genuine self-sacrifice.

During the meal, the angels announced to him that exactly one year later, he and his wife Sarah would have a son.

Sarah heard and laughed in her heart: "My husband Avraham will become a father? But he is already very old."

Immediately, G-d appeared to Avraham and asked: Avraham. "Why did Sarah laugh, saying: 'Shall I truly give birth, now that I am old?'" (Genesis 18:13). "Why does Sarah think that because she is old, she cannot give birth?"

From this episode, the Gemara (Yevamot 65b) teaches us the holy and proper path in life:

Rabbi Yishmael says: Great is peace, for even the Holy One, blessed be He, altered the truth for the sake of peace. For Sarah had in fact blamed Avraham and said: "And my master is old" (Genesis 18:12), while G-d changed what she had said and related to Avraham that she had said: "And I am old."

Poignantly, Rabbi Chaim Shmuelevitz writes<sup>9</sup> that from here we learn the weighty importance of shalom bayit (domestic harmony).

Even though Avraham and Sarah were righteous individuals and well advanced in their years, G-d still changed her words to avoid causing Avraham any offense — that she attributed the impossibility to his old age, not her own.

From this, we learn that investing effort and work on shalom bayit isn't only for newlyweds in their first, second, or third year of marriage — but throughout their entire lives, they must constantly build love and harmony between them.

It is even permitted to deviate from the truth for the sake of peace between a couple, even when they are a hundred years old, in order not to harm their relationship to the slightest degree.

We return to Rabbi Yosef Chaim, who continues and asks:

Would it not have been better if G-d had simply refrained from asking the question, "Why did Sarah laugh?" That way, He wouldn't have needed to alter her words at all.

He answers with the following:

G-d intentionally made this episode known in the Torah to teach us a valuable lesson:

A person should not say, "I am a pious individual, I hate falsehood, and I therefore only speak the truth and justice; therefore, I will not lie — even for the sake of peace."

That is why G-d altered a detail that didn't even need to be said, all to teach us that a person must alter the truth when necessary for the sake of peace.

In conclusion, we'll quote the words of Reishit Chochmah (Sha'ar Derech Eretz, Gate 1, letter 20):

"One must be gracious to people, compassionate to the poor, a savior to the needy, wise among the wise, a brother to the righteous, a companion to the pure-hearted, a friend to the pious, merciful to students, a father to orphans, one who sharpens the scholars, teaches the naïve, and a source of joy to the downtrodden.

**Parshat Shoftim - True Recognition of Others**

Whoever brings joy to the brokenhearted and the afflicted, comforts mourners and speaks to the heart of the poor and the unfortunate — he is

assured a place in the World to Come."

After this lengthy discussion, we return to the first question we posed:

**True Recognition of Others**

At the beginning of our discussion, we referenced the story of the shoemaker who died of shame, and how, in the wake of this event, Rabbi Yisrael Salanter founded the Beit HaMussar (House of Ethical Study).

We brought the claim of Rabbi Nota, who argued that such cruelty doesn't exist in people's hearts, but rather, the Beit HaMussar was established because of the one who was shamed and his self-centeredness.

Yet, even this assumption has been questioned, for it is highly unlikely that a person would die in this manner simply from embarrassment. The matter so far has remained unclear.

But now, based on everything we explained, it is well understood:

The Beit HaMussar was not founded because of the one who shamed, nor because of the one who was shamed — it was established because of a lack of recognition of the other individual's existence.

If the one who caused the shame had been accustomed to seeing every human being as a real, living being with an entire system of intellect. Thus, as abovementioned, have imagined harming someone else emotionally.

As well said, cruelty is, in fact, the result of contempt.

Likewise, if the one who was shamed had also been used to seeing others as complete and respected real beings with minds and hearts, he would not have been hurt.

He would have understood that the one who insulted him was currently in a state of emotional contractedness, his heart filled with jealousy, and that his role is to, in fact, to rescue and help him out of this jealousy.

A person who trains himself to feel the emotions of others — when he sees someone in a "low" or diminished state, he doesn't reject or ignore him, and certainly, he doesn't get hurt by him. Rather, he does all he can to help and lift him up.

Let us go even deeper:

Every human being is composed of five dimensions, in ascending order: Action, Speech, Thought, Emotion, and Intellect.

The core of human life resides in the emotional realm; that is where a person's spiritual ascents and descents take place. That is where the battles between smallness and greatness, between darkness and light, unfold.

Therefore, when someone harms another, it reveals that he himself is presently in darkness, surrounded by harmful spiritual forces.

Consequently, the one who receives the insult should be filled with compassion for him and do all he can to lift him out of the trash heap, up into the realms of G-dliness and palaces of holiness.<sup>10</sup>

This, then, is why Rabbi Yisrael established the Beit HaMussar:

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*~ Wellsprings of Wisdom ~*

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**10.** The holy Zohar states (Acharei Mot, 73a):

"Three levels are bound to one another — the Holy One, blessed be He; the Torah; and the Jewish people.

And each one, level upon level, has a hidden and a revealed aspect."

The sages of the Jewish people, who unite themselves with Torah study and truly give their lives over to it, consequently become one with G-d Himself — and with the Jewish people as well.

That is why they feel a deep and genuine connection to every single Jew, no matter who he may be.

**Parshat Shoftim - Summary and Practical Conclusions**

To restore awareness and sensitivity, and appreciation of reality to its true place.

**Summary and Practical Conclusions**

1. G-d's primary trait is truth, and his seal is truth. Therefore, the very pillar upon which the world stands is the "pillar of truth."

On the opposite end, the most destructive force — one that severs one's connection to the Divine — is falsehood.

Even a single lie distances a person entirely from G-d, and in the World to Come, one who lies does not merit to stand before G-d.

2. Therefore, one who desires closeness to G-d — and to merit His constant and unceasing blessings — must be meticulous about truth in every step of life; he must not perform any action that lacks integrity, nor let a single false word pass his lips.

3. Thus, if a person experiences a period of "Divine concealment" — sustaining business failures, domestic strife, difficulties with children, or any other type of hardships — he should investigate and seek out: Who may I have I, wittingly or not, deceived recently?

The said deception may have been the cause that G-d has, so to speak, withdrawn His close supervision.

As long as one clings to any form of falsehood, he has a weakened connection to G-d and lives in a state of spiritual concealment.

Therefore, anyone who knows that he is "addicted" to the toxic spiritual poison of falsehoods must do everything in their power to break free of it as soon as possible — so that the divine concealment will lift and so that G-d's providence may return.

4. Our sages have said: "It is better for a person to die than to live a life of lies," meaning that if a person is faced with two choices: to live a life of lies or to speak the ultimate truth and to suffer death — one should prefer to die as a man of truth and values than to live life as a liar.

In this way, one will attain eternal closeness to G-d in the world to come, while if he lives as a liar, he will not merit to enter before the Divine presence.

5. Every person exists and expresses themselves in five dimensions: action, speech, thought, emotion, and intellect.

The main axis of human life is emotion — where the rises and falls within a person occur and where the

**Parshat Shoftim - Summary and Practical Conclusions**

struggle between smallness and greatness, between darkness and light, takes place.

When someone harms another, it reveals that they are currently in a state of darkness, surrounded by unholy powers.

Therefore, one who receives the insult must be aware of this and be filled with compassion, and try with all their strength to lift up the other from the trash heap — upward, to the worlds and palaces of holiness.

**Shabbat Shalom!**



B"H



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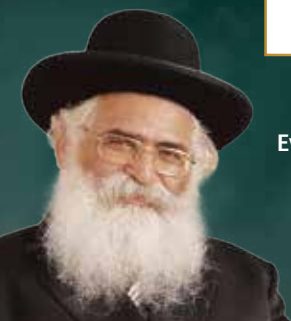


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## Shabbat Times Shoftim

6<sup>th</sup> of Elul, 5785



City	Candle Lighting	Shabbat Ends	Rabbeinu Tam
New York	7:14 pm	8:13 pm	8:43 pm
Miami	7:25 pm	8:17 pm	8:54 pm
Los Angeles	7:05 pm	8:00 pm	8:33 pm
Montreal	7:19 pm	8:21 pm	8:47 pm
Toronto	7:40 pm	8:40 pm	9:08 pm
London	7:35 pm	8:43 pm	9:03 pm
Jerusalem	6:51 pm	7:40 pm	8:28 pm
Tel Aviv	6:48 pm	7:38 pm	8:25 pm
Haifa	6:48 pm	7:41 pm	8:28 pm
Be'er Sheva	6:47 pm	7:40 pm	8:27 pm

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*From the Words of*  
**HaRav Yoram Abargel zt"l**

*The vitality and lifeblood of life  
is joy.*

*True joy is attained by  
nullification and self-  
defacement before G-d,  
without this feeling, joy is not  
attainable or possible.*

*Thus, joy is essentially an  
expression of nullification.  
Thus, the attribute of  
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is followed by the attribute of  
Binah - Understanding, which  
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