

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch comments,

If this simply meant to forbid a return to Egypt it would probably just have said it explicitly rather than placing an emphasis on the manner or way of the return . . . For in fact Egypt had been a land of refuge from Palestine from the earliest times of Jewish history. Abraham went down to Egypt because there was a famine in Palestine. For the same reason, Isaac was about to go there and was only restrained by direct instructions from God. Israel's whole settlement in Egypt was only brought about by the famine in Palestine which made the sons of Jacob go repeatedly to Egypt to buy food. So that the natural fertility of the Egyptian soil gave Egypt an ascendant superiority over other countries and that made other countries, especially Palestine appear dependent on them. Accordingly, the meaning of this verse is that you will not go from Palestine to Egypt as in the past to obtain from there any national necessities which your own land does not supply. You are not to make yourselves dependent on Egypt. (*Commentary on Deuteronomy*, 339)

The Torah then does not concern itself with the possibility of renewed Jewish settlement in Egypt. The biblical concern within the context of the Israelite king revolves around the quality of the relationship between Israel and Egypt. As the Israelites march toward freedom in their own land, they are cautioned about the fragility of their status. They are now a free people; and that freedom cannot be taken for granted. They are forbidden from returning to the same power dynamic—that is to say, they may not once again become dependent on Egypt. From this moment forward, they must demonstrate their economic and political independence. And more than that, Israelite dependence is on God—not on any human construct. By protecting their newfound status and nurturing their relationship with God and Torah, the Israelites ensure that they will never again return to the shackles of Egyptian slavery. One cannot think of a more important message as we enter the month of Elul this week, preparing for our sacred reunion with God, Torah, and community.

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PARASHAH COMMENTARY

By Rabbi Danielle Upbin, Florida Rabbinic Fellow, JTS

Who's Judging?

In the opening verses of our Torah portion, the Israelites are commanded to establish a fair, impartial, and moral judicial system upon settling the Land of Israel. The centerpiece of these verses is the double injunction: “*tzedek tzedek tirdof*” (“Justice, Justice you shall pursue”; 16:20). Whenever the reader of Torah comes across a repeated word, we are being invited to probe the verse for deeper meaning. Often, repetition is employed for emphasis. In this context, a moral judiciary is critical to the establishment of a moral society. Considering the time of year that Parashat Shofetim falls, one can read the duplicate words as a statement about the inner workings of the individual as much as they concern the outer workings of the community.

The Hebrew month of Elul, which we have just begun, is an invitation to prepare for the impending Yom Hadin, the Day of Judgment connected with the festivals of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. One of the essential spiritual practices of the season is *teshuvah*. Typically translated as “return,” *teshuvah* describes a process of shifting our spiritual position toward God and toward our best ideation of self.

On the path of *teshuvah*, one must start with introspection, becoming one's own judge. Through this process, we prepare ourselves to stand before the True Judge. In the Lower Court of our own judgment, we are tasked to review our own case and take account of our own actions and thoughts. *Teshuvah* is our vehicle for inner transformation, while the Torah provides us with signposts and direction.

When read in this light, *tzedek tzedek tirdof* gives us a focus for our spiritual preparation. What does the pursuit of justice look like on an emotional level? Can we approach our inner conflicts as impartial judges? Are we not always in favor of ourselves, swayed by our biases, influences, upbringing, and environments? Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler, in his work *Strive for Truth!*, writes about the challenge of honesty and impartiality in self-judgment:

Our rabbis said that intimacy engendered by accepting the slightest favor from a person makes the judge identify with that person and precludes him from ever judging him truthfully because “no one can see anything bad about himself.” How then can we ever hope to arrive at true decisions in matters which involve seeing bad about ourselves in the most literal sense of the words, such as admitting our own faults and accepting views which would oblige us to do things which are difficult for us and to refrain from activities which are attractive to us? . . .

And if our deviation from the truth distorts a judge’s whole system of thought, what can we say about ourselves, who from our youth up have been used to making excuses for ourselves, minimizing the extent of our failings and exaggerating our good points? (Volume I, translated by Aryeh Carmell, Feldheim Publishers, 169–170)

We can glean from Rabbi Dessler’s teaching that when we make excuses for our shortcomings and failures, we stand in the way of our own spiritual progress. In the words of another teacher, Pogo, the central character of a long-running daily American comic strip created by the late Walt Kelly: “We have met the enemy, and he is us.”

There are also those who suffer from an equally debilitating obstacle: overly critical self-judgment. When we accept blame upon ourselves when others could share more of the responsibility, for example, or when we come down hard on ourselves after a poor performance (real or perceived). Perfectionists of all kinds—whether in the arts, parenting, or business—often suffer from debilitating self-criticism. Even when others applaud, they don’t feel the fulfillment or satisfaction of a job well done. I can’t help but think of the many famous personalities whom we have lost recently and over the years to causes related to self-criticism. Not taking into consideration the severity of the clinical aspects of some of these personalities, it would sadly seem that all of the adoration in the world was somehow not enough to assuage their innermost discontent.

The consequences of self-flagellating and glossing over our character flaws make it impossible to be our own impartial judge. The pursuit of justice in Elul requires partnering with God in reconciliation and rehabilitation. Our role as judge in the Lower Court is to inspire truth telling as a vehicle for transformation and fulfillment. We are our best expert witness and our best agent for change.

An important goal of *teshuvah* is to feel at peace with ourselves—with

both our past and present. How do we do that? Interestingly, the Hebrew root word for *pursuit* of justice, פ.ד.ר, (*r.d.f*), is also paired with the pursuit of peace: “Seek peace and pursue it” (*rodef shalom uvakshehu*; Ps. 34:15). When read together with our verse from Shofetim, we have a more complete picture of the instruction for self-judgment. Just as God is the Judge who is “*rav hesed ve’emet*” (“attributed with love and truth”; Exod. 34:6), perhaps being in the image of God, we too can negotiate our self-judgment with these sometimes opposing values of justice, love, and truth.

Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel expressed the import of this delicate navigation when he said, “By three things the world is sustained: by judgment, by truth, and by peace, as it is written, (Zech. 8:16) ‘. . . render true and peaceful judgments within your gates’” (M Avot 1:18).

Through our Elul preparations, may peace, judgment, and truth harmonize within our own gates, helping us to render a favorable verdict for ourselves and for others in the year ahead.

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A TASTE OF TORAH

By Rabbi Matthew Berkowitz, Director of Israel Programs, The Rabbinical School, JTS

Dependent? Yes, But on Whom?

The Cairo Genizah, a rich treasure trove of Jewish history (60,000 fragments of this repository are housed in The Library of The Jewish Theological Seminary) rediscovered by Solomon Schechter toward the end of the 19th century, attests to the rich Jewish life that flourished in Egypt and beyond. Testimony to the success and richness of the Egyptian Jewish community over many hundreds of years is especially surprising, given the pronouncement of this week’s Torah reading, Parashat Shofetim. In legislating laws concerning the appointment of a king over Israel, Torah states emphatically, “He shall not keep many horses or send people back to Egypt to add to his horses, since the Lord has warned you, ‘You must not go back that way again’” (Deut. 17:16). How are we to relate to the Torah’s prohibition of returning to Egypt? Is this a blanket prohibition on living in the land of Egypt? Or is this legislation somehow restricted in a particular way?