

Torah Weekly

7"בס

August 16-22, 2020
26 Av – 2 Elul, 5780

Torah: Shoftim:
Deuteronomy 16:18 - 21:9
Haftarah: Isaiah 51:12 - 52:12

PARSHAT SHOFTIM

Calendars

We have Jewish Calendars. If you would like one, please send us a letter and we will send you one, or ask the Rabbi/Chaplain to contact us.

Family Programs

Do you have family on the outside struggling? Please contact or have them contact our office to learn more about our family programs. You and they are not alone, we are here to help.

Grape Juice & Matzah

We offer free Grape Juice and Matzoh for you to be able to make the blessings every Shabbos. Please have your chaplain / Rabbi contact us to enroll (available to all prisons).

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Spirituality Made Simple

What is the difference between spirituality and spiritualism? Spirituality is an awareness of the spirit, of the soul; it is a sensitivity to things beyond the immediate and the material. That's why some describe the study of spirituality as metaphysics—the study of that which lies beyond the physical. Spiritualism, on the other hand, is how we describe the practices of dabbling in the occult, such as trying to communicate with the dead. In ancient times these activities were referred to as sorcery or black magic. For Jews, *spirituality* is recommended, but *spiritualism* is discouraged. In fact, it is actually forbidden explicitly in verses in this week's Torah reading, Shoftim. The Torah cautions the Israelites, who were about to enter the Promised Land, from mimicking the heathen and abominable pagan rites of the Canaanites. And after listing these forbidden practices, it adds, "You shall be wholehearted with the L-rd, your G-d" (Deuteronomy 18:13). Now the Hebrew word for "wholehearted" is *tamim*. It is from the same root as the word *tam*, which we might recognize as one of the Four Sons at the Passover Seder. The *tam* is the simple son, who is ignorant and foolish. So why would the Torah use a word here that conveys a lack of intelligence? Clearly, the Torah is not encouraging us to be fools?! The accepted explanation is that the Torah does not mean "simple" in the

sense of unintelligent, but rather "simple" in the sense of straightforward, not overly sophisticated or cynical, but simple and filled with faith in G-d, with no need to go looking into the dark corners of the universe. This explanation would help us understand a traditional inscription on many Jewish tombstones: איש תם וישר, *ish tam v'yashar*, "[Here lies] a simple and upright man." Would any child write an epitaph for a father calling him a fool?! But "simple" in this context does not mean unwise; it means simple and wholehearted in faith. The term is used to praise an upright individual who lived his life with honesty, sincerity and wholesomeness. This simple person accepts that G-d alone is the Master of the Universe. He doesn't try to outsmart his Creator by looking for answers in the wrong places, or by attempting to outwit destiny by consulting the spirits or the stars. If G-d decided to take his loved one, he does not feel the need to find her somewhere else in the cosmos and communicate with her. He is trusting of the Almighty's vast eternal plan, and he does his part to advance within the framework G-d set out for him. He may, in fact, be quite wise, but he's not a "wise guy." The simple and upright person is one who bows his head to kiss a Torah scroll, or the child who kisses every *mezuzah* he passes. The founder of Chassidism, the holy Baal Shem Tov, taught us that people of simple faith are so special that their prayers can pierce the gates of heaven like no other prayers

can. This quality of simplicity sheds light on an enigmatic sequence in our prayer books. One of the prayers that many people are familiar with is *Ein Keilokeinu*. Some communities recite it daily, others only on Shabbat and Yom Tov. The words mean "There is none like our G-d." Then, in the next line we say *Mi Keilokeinu*? "Who is like our G-d?" Now surely we should first be asking, "Who is like our G-d?" and then be giving the obvious answer, "There is none like our G-d." Why do we give the answer before the question? One famous explanation is that we must first express our simple faith in G-d: *Ein Keilokeinu*, "There is none like our G-d." G-d is absolutely unique. Once we have established this fundamental principle of faith, we are then permitted to ask, *Mi Kelokeinu*? Is there anyone else out there? Are there any other candidates for us to worship and pray to? But the answer is so obvious that we say it outright and up front: *Ein Kelokeinu*! There is *none* like our G-d. Now, you want to ask questions and discuss philosophy? By all means. But first, the principle of faith must be stated and accepted. Questions are kosher. In the same Passover Seder where we find the *tam* as one of the Four Sons, we also have the Four Questions. The Talmud is filled with questions and arguments, propositions and rebuttals. But we ask questions, not to challenge, but to better understand. We start with the premise of belief, and then ask questions with simple humility, and with sincere, wholehearted

and genuine faith and trust in G-d. Let us be simple, not sly. Let us be simple people, not scheming politicians or spin doctors. Let us all be simple, straight, honest and genuine, so that one day they will say of us, too, "Here lies a simple and upright person." By Rabbi Yossy Goldman

Are You Objective? There was once a king who was very fond of target shooting. He practiced daily and arranged competitions. With time he felt that he had gotten pretty good at the sport, yet he continued trying to improve. One day, as he was traveling through the countryside, the king noticed several target boards near a small peasant hut. Looking closely, he was astonished to see that every one of the many darts on the boards was precisely in the center! This simple peasant was apparently an expert; he had hit a bull's-eye with every try! Curious to learn how the man had done it, the king knocked on the door of the hut. The peasant who answered laughed heartily at the king's question. "Why, it's very simple," he replied naively. "Instead of drawing the target and aiming towards it, I throw the darts, and then draw the circles around them. It works every time . . ." The Torah portion of Shoftim (Deuteronomy 16:18–21:9) includes a prohibition for judges to take bribes. The Torah then explains the reason for this commandment: "For bribery blinds the eyes of the wise." Now, you're probably thinking, "No kidding, that's the definition of a bribe! What kind of reason is that?" Good point. But, actually, the Torah is not trying to explain what's wrong with paying off a judge; it's obvious that corrupting fair judgment is immoral. Rather, the Torah seeks to clarify a fact. Often, people say, "I can be objective in this case, despite my connection to it." Recognizing the difficulty of proper judgment when personal concerns are involved, we may nonetheless convince ourselves that we are immune to bribery, intellectually and emotionally capable of separating fact from feeling. Yet the Torah cautions us that the danger of bribery is not merely a possibility, nor even a probability. It is an automatic effect. Bribery—monetary or otherwise—skews one's perception, literally "blinding" him to reality. No one is immune. We are all judges, all of the time. There are important decisions to be made constantly, and these require clear thinking and examination of facts. But often, we may be swayed by bribes—personal concerns, interests and feelings. We may have the best of intentions, yet the possibility of a purely objective decision is technically out of our reach, "for bribery blinds the eyes of the wise." For this reason, it is crucial that every one of us have a mentor, an objective individual upon whom we rely to help us make decisions. Before signing on the dotted line, run it by someone out of the picture. It's a sort of reality check, a way to make sure that we are aiming towards the target, rather than adjusting the goal to suit us.

By Rabbi Mendy Wolf

Sunday, August 16, 2020 --- 26 Av, 5780

Tzemach Tzedek Departs Petersburg (1843)

In 1843, the Interior Ministry of the Czarist government convened a rabbinical conference in the Russian capital of Petersburg, to the end of imposing changes in Jewish communal life and religious practice. Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Lubavitch (1789-1866, known as the "Tzemach Tzedek" after his Halachic works by that name) was invited; as a primary figure in the leadership of Russian Jewry, his compliance was required to lend legitimacy to the government's proposed "reforms". In the course of the conference, the Tzemach Tzedek was placed under arrest no less than 22 (!) times for his refusal to cooperate. When he finally departed Petersburg on the 26th of Av, he had successfully prevented the government's disruption of traditional Jewish life.

Monday, August 17, 2020

27 Av, 5780 --- Passing of R. Yehoshua of Cracow (1648)

R. Yehoshua was one of the leading Polish scholars of his day, and was held in great reverence by his contemporaries. He led a Talmudic academy in Cracow which attracted many noteworthy disciples (such as R. Shabtai HaKohen, the *Shach*). R. Yehoshua authored *Maginei Shlomo*, devoted to answering the difficulties raised by the Tosafist scholars against Rashi in his Talmud commentary. He also authored a collection of halachic responsa titled *Pnei Yehoshua* (not to be confused with the Talmudic commentary of the same name authored by his great-grandson, R. Yaakov Yehoshua)

Wednesday, August 19, 2020 --- 29 Av, 5780

Flight from Liadi (1812)

On this date, Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi, who supported and aided the Czar's army during the Napoleonic wars, was forced to flee his hometown from Napoleon's forces which were advancing through White Russia in their push toward Moscow. After five months of wanderings he arrived in the town of Pyena. There he fell ill and, weakened by the tribulations of his flight and the harsh Russian winter, passed away on the 24th of Tevet, 5573 (1812).

Passing of R. Eliezer Zusia Portugal, the Skulener Rebbe (1982)

R. Eliezer Zusia Portugal (1898–1982), the Skulener Rebbe, is best known for his superhuman efforts to rescue Jewish orphans and refugees in Eastern Europe before, during, and after World War II and his continuing support of them. He immigrated to the United States in 1960, after imprisonment in Rumania and international efforts to secure his release. He was renowned for his lengthy prayers and the beautiful tunes he composed.

Thursday, August 20, 2020 --- 30 Av, 5780

2nd Tablets Hewn (1313 BCE)

On the last day of Av of the year 2448 from creation (1313 BCE), Moses carved, by G-d's command, two stone tablets -- each a cube measuring 6x6x3 *tefachim* (a tefach, "handbreadth", is approximately 3.2 inches) -- to replace the two divinely-made tablets, on which G-d had inscribed the Ten Commandments, which Moses had smashed 42 days earlier upon witnessing Israel's worship of the Golden Calf.

Friday, August 21, 2020 --- 1 Elul, 5780

Moses ascends Sinai for 3rd 40 days (1313 BCE)

On the early morning of the 1st of Elul of the year 2448 from creation (1313 BCE) Moses ascended Mount Sinai, taking with him the stone tablets he had hewn by divine command (see "Today in Jewish History" for yesterday, Av 30), for G-d to re-inscribe the Ten Commandments. On the mountain, G-d allowed Moses to "see My back, but not My face" (which Maimonides interprets as a perception of G-d's reality but not His essence) -- the closest any human being ever came to knowing G-d -- and taught him the secret of His "Thirteen Attributes of Mercy" (Exodus 33:18-34:8).

Moses remained on the mountain for 40 days, until the 10th of Tishrei (Yom Kippur), during which time He obtained G-d's whole-hearted forgiveness and reconciliation with the people of Israel following their betrayal of the covenant between them with their worship of the Golden Calf. This was the third of Moses' three 40-day periods on Mount Sinai in connection with the Giving of the Torah. Ever since, the month of Elul serves as the "month of Divine mercy and forgiveness."

Shabbat, August 22, 2020 --- 2 Elul, 5780

Shulchan Aruch Completed (Orech Chaim) (1555)

The first section of the Shulchan Aruch (Code of Jewish Law) authored by Rabbi Joseph Caro (1488-1575) was completed in the Holy Land on this date in 1555.