

## PARSHAT SHOFTIM

30 Av - 6 Elul 5785  
24 - 30 August 2025

Torah: Duet. 16:18-21:9  
Haftorah: Isaiah 51:12-52:12

PSALMS DAILY

### Psalms for our brethren in the Holy Land

*Psalm 117*

1. Praise the Lord, all nations, laud Him, all peoples.
2. For His kindness has overwhelmed us, and the truth of the Lord is eternal. Hallelujah!

(Please say Chapter 20 daily)

SEFER HAMITZVOT

### Negative Mitzvah 229 Neglecting the Levite

We are enjoined not to neglect the Levites, not to refrain from giving them the gifts due to them, and to invite them to join our celebration of the festivals.

### Positive Mitzvah 16 Assembling the Jewish People ("Hakhel")

On the second day of Sukkot on the year following the Sabbatical Year, it is a Mitzvah for the entire Jewish nation to be gathered, and that verses from the Book of Deuteronomy be read before them.

## ARE WE 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  
Project LIFE, New York*

## IS YOUR BODY YOURS?

Every four years, much of the world tunes in to the Olympic Games with rapt attention. A tradition stretching all the way back to ancient Greece, at its core, these games still pay homage to the greatness of the human body.

Indeed, those ancient Greeks were fascinated with the human body, glorifying it and marveling at its finesse and power. Seeing just how far they could push it was a near obsession, which they saw as part of their idolatrous worship.

While the terms may have changed in modern times, and you'd be hard pressed to find anyone who literally worships their body, the idea lives on in many different forms, and the pagan origin of the Olympics can still be seen in some of its modern iteration.

So, what is the Jewish approach to our bodies? The body, after all, is a marvelous thing; we can't just ignore it. But glorifying it seems a bit over the top, as well.

### By Your Own Words

Among the many items in the Torah portion of Shoftim, we learn of the ironclad Torah rule that in a Jewish court of law, the only form of acceptable testimony is from two valid witnesses:

*"One witness shall not rise up against any person for any iniquity or for any sin, regarding any sin that he will sin. By the mouth of two witnesses, or by the mouth of three witnesses, shall the matter be confirmed."* - Deut. 19:15

But there's an exception: monetary disputes. Say, for example, Reuven claims that Shimon owes him \$100. If Shimon readily admits that he does owe the money, then his "testimony" is accepted. In the words of the Talmud, "A person's own admission is like a hundred witnesses."

But this rule is limited to finances alone. In cases of capital punishment

or other corporal punishment, a person's own admission is unacceptable. So, say Reuven is being tried in court for murder, a grave offense with a serious punishment that is only administered upon the testimony of two valid witnesses, and then, to everyone's surprise, Reuven shockingly admits to the crime.

Is his testimony accepted? Do we put him to death upon his own admission? Absolutely not.

Why? What better proof can there be than the defendant's own admission that he or she did the crime? And why do we accept a person's own testimony with regards to their property, but not their own life?

### It's Not Your Body

A classic rabbinic explanation: Your property belongs to you, so you're free to do with it as you please. If you want to give your money by admitting to your litigant in court, go right ahead.

But your body doesn't belong to you; it belongs to G-d. It's not your property to do with as you please. It is a treasured loan that G-d gives you for however long you're on this earth. It's absolutely not yours to do with as you please, and so a person's own admission in court will be rejected if the outcome is death.

Which leads us to a fascinating conclusion: According to Jewish tradition, you own your property more than your very body!

### Your Body Is Holy

Think about that for a moment: Your car, your house, your computer, and your phone, they're all yours to do with as you wish. No one will stop you from tossing your phone off a bridge, and if you can find some sort of constructive reason for taking a hatchet to your freshly painted walls, go right ahead.

But Judaism looks at your body in a completely different way. As the Torah tells us in the very beginning of the Creation story, the human body was fashioned in the "image of G-d," and it is really only given to you on loan.

Just as you wouldn't borrow your neighbor's car and ram it into a tree, you ought not to harm, mutilate, or otherwise disrespect your body. So, the Greeks got it right... and terribly wrong at the same time.

They were right that the human body is, in fact, a marvelous thing. But

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they got it egregiously wrong to think that the body is something to worship in its own right. This is a narcissistic, base perspective that ultimately drags the human being down to primitive levels, unable to appreciate his or her body for anything more than the brute physical matter that it is.

You know why the human body is really marvelous? There are many reasons. For starters, because it is G-d's gift to us. It's also marvelous because it's created in G-d's image. It's even more marvelous because it houses a soul, something that makes you, me, and every other person special, unique, and Divine. And that's how you ought to approach your workout regimen or your fitness class. Judaism has nothing against working out, being fit, eating healthy, or running the marathon. These are excellent activities.

The key is perspective. Why are you running the marathon? Is it because you're in love with your physique, or do you simply want to see how far you can push yourself?

Do better. Run that marathon because G-d gave you a body that houses a soul, and you respect that gift and wish to take care of it. You know

that you can better serve your Creator, you can be a better parent or friend, when you're feeling healthy, well-rested, and fit.

That's why you're following a food regimen and lifting weights. Not to compete in next year's Olympics, but to bring glory to G-d by respecting the body He gave you.

*By Rabbi Aharon Loschak  
Editor, Jewish Learning Institute*

## SHOFTIM IN A NUTSHELL

The name of the Parshah, "Shoftim," means "Judges" and it is found in Deuteronomy 16:18. Moses instructs the people of Israel to appoint judges and law enforcement officers in every city. "Justice, justice shall you pursue," he commands them, and you must administer it without corruption or favoritism. Crimes must be meticulously investigated, and evidence thoroughly examined - a minimum of two credible witnesses is required for conviction and punishment.

In every generation, says Moses, there will be those entrusted with the task of interpreting and applying the laws of the Torah. "According to the law that they will teach you, and the judgment

they will instruct you, you shall do; you shall not turn away from the thing that they say to you, to the right nor to the left."

Shoftim also includes the prohibitions against idolatry and sorcery; laws governing the appointment and behavior of a Jewish king; and guidelines for the creation of "cities of refuge" for the inadvertent murderer. Also set forth are many of the rules of war: the exemption from battle for one who has just built a home, planted a vineyard, married, or is "afraid and soft-hearted"; the requirement to offer terms of peace before attacking a city; and the prohibition against wanton destruction of something of value, exemplified by the law that forbids to cut down a fruit tree when laying siege (in this context the Torah makes the famous statement, "For man is a tree of the field").

The Parshah concludes with the law of the Eglah Arufah - the special procedure to be followed when a person is killed by an unknown murderer and his body is found in a field - which underscores the responsibility of the community and its leaders not only for what they do, but also for what they might have prevented from being done.

## IN JEWISH HISTORY

### **Sunday, 30 Av 5785 - 24 August 2025** **2<sup>nd</sup> Tablets Hewn (1313 BCE)**

On the last day of Av of the year 2448 (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.

### **Monday, 1 Elul 5785 - 25 August 2025**

#### **Prophecy of Haggai Encouraging Building of the Second Temple (353 BCE)**

On this day, the prophet Haggai received a divine message to pass on to "Zerubavel son of She'altiel ruler of Judah and Joshua son of Jehozadak the High Priest", instructing them to continue their efforts to build the Second Temple, whose construction had been halted some seventeen years prior.

#### **Moroccan Jewry Saved From Portuguese Conquest (1578)**

In 5338 (1578), a Portuguese army led by King Sebastian I joined forces with the deposed Moroccan Sultan Abdallah Mohammed, who desired to regain the throne from his uncle, Abd al-Malik. Victory of the Portuguese king would inevitably lead to the infamous Inquisition taking hold in Morocco. On 1 Elul, the Portuguese army was defeated in what is known as the Battle of the Three Kings. Some Moroccan communities would commemorate this date each year as a day of celebration, thanking G-d for His salvation.

### **Tuesday, 2 Elul 5785 - 26 August 2025**

#### **Shulchan Aruch Completed (Orech Chaim) (1555)**

The first section of the Shulchan Aruch (Code of Jewish Law) authored by Rabbi Joseph Caro

(5248-5335, or 1488-1575) was completed in the Holy Land on this date in 5315 (1555).

### **Wednesday, 3 Elul 5785 - 27 August 2025**

#### **Passing of Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook (1935)**

3 Elul is the Yahrzeit of the first Ashkenazic Chief Rabbi of Israel (in modern times), and the foremost leader of the Religious Zionist Jewish community in the Holy Land, Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, who assumed his position upon the formation of the British Mandate in 5680 (1920). A leading philosopher and mystic, Rabbi Kook authored many books and letters.

### **Thursday, 4 Elul 5785 - 28 August 2025**

#### **Passing of Rabbi Meir Simchah Hakohen (1926)**

Rabbi Meir Simchah Hakohen served as rabbi of Dvinsk (now Daugavpils), Latvia, for nearly forty years. He authored Or Same'ach, on Maimonides' Mishneh Torah, and Meshech Chachmah, on the Pentateuch. He passed away on 4 Elul 5686 (1926).

### **Friday, 5 Elul 5785 - 29 August 2025**

#### **Ezekiel Envisions Jerusalem's Downfall (428 BCE)**

On the 5<sup>th</sup> of Elul, Ezekiel was sitting in his home in Babylonia, with the elders of Judah seated before him. Suddenly, the hand of G-d fell upon him, and he experienced a vision in which he was transported to Jerusalem and shown all the abominations taking place there. He was then informed about Jerusalem's impending destruction, which indeed took place less than five years later.

#### **First Chassidic Aliya (1777)**

The first Chassidic Aliyah ("ascent" - immigration to the Holy Land), led by Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Vitebsk, Rabbi Abraham of Kalisk and Rabbi Yisroel of Polotzk, reached the Holy Land on 5 Elul of the year 5537 (1777). They were all disciples of the 2<sup>nd</sup> leader of the Chassidic

movement, Rabbi DovBer, the "Maggid of Mezeritch" (who had passed away five years earlier) and colleagues of Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi, founder of Chabad. Initially, Rabbi Schneur Zalman was part of the group, but, when the caravan reached the city of Moholiev on the Dnester River, Rabbi Menachem Mendel - whom Rabbi Schneur Zalman regarded as his teacher and mentor after the Maggid's passing - instructed him to remain behind to serve as the leader of the Chassidic community in White Russia and Lithuania. Rabbi Schneur Zalman retained close ties with the settlers in the Land of Israel and labored to raise funds for their support.

### **Shabbat, 6 Elul 5785 - 30 August 2025**

#### **Passing of Rabbi Yom Tov Lipman Heller, the "Tosfot Yom Tov" (1654)**

Rabbi Yom Tov was a preeminent Torah scholar who served as rabbi in many distinguished communities in Austria and Poland. He is most famous for his Mishnah commentary, called Tosfot Yom Tov, which appears in most large editions of the Mishnah and is an indispensable tool for obtaining a thorough understanding of the text. He authored numerous other works as well, including a commentary on the halachic work of Rabbi Asher ben Yechiel (the Rosh), and Tzurat Habayit, clarifying the future layout of the third Holy Temple in Jerusalem.

In his autobiographical work Megilat Eivah, Rabbi Yom Tov describes how, when serving as rabbi of Prague, his enemies slandered him to the Austrian Emperor, resulting in his imprisonment and a death sentence. Thankfully, the verdict was later mitigated to a monetary fine and a prohibition against serving as rabbi in Prague.

He served as the rabbi in Nemirov, Ukraine for three years and then in Krakow, Poland, where he passed away on 6 Elul 5414 (1654).