

Torah Talk – מאמרי תורה



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**Parashat Shoftim
August 18, 2018**

**פרשת שופטים
ז' באלול תשע"ח**

Torah Reading: *Devarim* (Deuteronomy) 16:18-21:9

In this *parasha*, Moshe reviews the justice system for the Bnei Yisrael, talks about the limits future kings should have on their possessions, and explains that the *Kohanim* [priests] and *Levi'im* [Levites] should not be paid and should survive on donations from the people. Finally, Moshe explains the laws of warfare.

Sforno (16th Century Italy) notes that throughout the previous *parasha*, *Re'eh*, the Torah addresses rules for the masses, such as prohibitions on serving idols and ingesting blood, creating a central place of worship, and giving tithes. Now the Torah turns to specific characters, “regarding the affairs of the leaders, these being the judges and kings, *kohanim* and prophets, through whose correct behavior the affairs of the masses will be improved, and through whose corrupt behavior the needs of the populace will be damaged.” Given human experience throughout the ages, how true this concept rings!

In chapter 17, verse 11, we encounter what seems to be a problematic message:
“על-פי התורה אשר יורוד, ועל-המשפט אשר-יאמרו לך--תעשה : לא תסור, מן-הדבר
אשר-יגידו לך--ימין ושמאל – According to the *Torah* (the law) which they will teach you, and according to the judgment which they will tell you, you shall do; do not turn aside from the sentence which they will declare to you, to the right hand, nor to the left.” Ramban (13th Century Spain/Judea) remarks, “...even if you think in your heart that they are mistaken, and the matter is simple in your eyes just as you know the difference between your right hand and your left hand, you must still do as they command you.”

But what if our leaders turn out to be corrupt? Is the Torah is telling us that we must obey them anyway? Some answers to this troubling question can be found in both the context and the phraseology of the verse.

The context of this verse is referring not to leaders in general, but specifically to judges, and even more specifically, to the *Sanhedrin*, the high court. Moreover, it seems to be addressing, at least according to Ramban, ritual law rather than civil law. In addition, note the words in the verse: the word used to talk about the law is “Torah,” which does literally mean both “law” and “teaching”. It is not coincidental that this is the word utilized rather than a more secular term. Its use here implies that if the masses are told something that is fundamentally against Torah values, then they are to reject it, similar to the concept in last week’s *parasha* that Bnei Yisrael are to reject out of hand any “prophet” who instructs them to abandon the Torah or any part of it.

Life is complex and messy. *Parashat Shoftim* begins to deal with some of that messiness: the moral dilemmas we face on a regular basis and the ethical decisions that face us each day of our lives.

Shabbat Shalom.

For Discussion:

- Think of an ethical dilemma that you have faced in your life. How did you decide the way to handle it? Did it turn out to be the correct decision?
- How much should we obey authority when we disagree with it and how much should we go along with it, assuming that the authority figure may know more than we? Authority figures can include not only political leaders, but parents and teachers. Should we resist when we disagree and if so, under what circumstances? If not, why not?
- How have communal leaders made your life better or worse? What might they have done differently to assure a better outcome?