

# Judge Every Person Favorably

*Parashat Shoftim*



## Parashat Shoftim

Shabbat Shalom. Parashat Shoftim is a more “practical” parasha, whose name, “Shoftim” (“judges”), testifies to its content. The parasha deals mainly with the government, where the people in the parasha are not “private individuals” but part of a collective called the Jewish people. And as such, the people are subject to the government, and must listen to the legislators.

### We Are All Lawyers

We must not lean on our own interpretation of the law, but rather strive to follow its spirit and intent.

At the beginning of our parasha there is a famous and well-known verse:

*“Do not pervert justice or show partiality. Do not accept a bribe, for a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and twists the words of the innocent.” – Deuteronomy 16:19 [NIV]*

A lawyer's job is misleading, he or she must justify a desired outcome, and then persuade the judge - irregardless of the truth. And if that lawyer were hired by the other side, he or she would reach and embrace the opposite conclusion.

Judges are warned not to accept bribes. Even if they try very hard to see things as they are, the money will blind them. Even a judgment that is reasoned, explained, and logical can be madness.

We all are lawyers in matters of faith, we all read the Torah from our own prejudice and previous ideas that have been planted in us. We can consistently ignore what is inconvenient to us in the text, and interpret what is convenient for us in such a way that it seems to us as logical and serious.

As lawyers, we lie to ourselves, using all the excuses in the world.

## **The True Intent, Not Our Own Interpretation**

We must try and find the courage to change and manage our lives according to the spirit and intent of the Scriptures, and not according to the most convenient way that we sometimes interpret the text to be.

We are also all judges, we all look at the people around us and judge them. Whether it's their politeness, their clothes, their children, and their belongings.

We all are judges, and usually we come to a verdict based on superficial appearances, without evidence, without investigation, without information on the reasoning behind each and every person.

## **Appearances Can be Deceiving**

There's a story about a father with two children riding a bus. The children were behaving wildly, they were very restless, bothering the other passengers.

The father, on his part, looked out of the window and seemed detached from reality, detached from the mess his children were making.

How did the other passengers judge him and the children?

“He is not a good father, he is detached from his children, the children are not educated, there is no discipline! Overall the situation is bad.”

You know how it is... Israelis like to push their nose into things that are not their business. So the passengers mentioned to the father that his children were not under control and that he should do something about it.

The father immediately responded, "Sorry for being so detached, we're just in shock, we are returning home from the hospital where their mother just died. I'll take care of the children."

## **We Don't Know the Whole Story**

Yes, this example is extreme, but I want to emphasize that one piece of information can make a night and day - or heaven and earth - difference. A moment ago, the emotions that flooded all passengers on the bus were, anger, annoyance, irritation, and contempt for the father, before they knew the whole story.

After they knew, after receiving the facts, the emotions changed to, pity, caring, understanding, and empathy. One piece of information can make all the difference in how we see the people around us.

And we tend to judge people and families without knowing what goes on behind the scenes. Sometimes we get hurt from each other, in the community, at work, and even at home, but we do not know the whole story, we do not know all the facts, so the conclusion that we reach will probably be incorrect.

## **Judge Every Person Favorably**

Pirkei Avot, or Ethics of the Fathers, is a tractate of the Mishnah that deals with morality, virtues, and righteousness. It teaches us many important rules, two of which are:

*"Do not judge your fellow until you come to his place." - Pirkei Avot 2:4*

*"...judge every person as meritorious." - Pirkei Avot 1:6*

It is easy for us to judge people, especially as we sit on a deck chair, look out at everyone else, ignoring whatever led to conflict. For example:

You see a neighbor, or a member of the community, and he does not say hello, he ignores you. How rude!

Maybe he's is egotistical and has no manners, so why am I even interested in his company? Or maybe he's mad at me, or I did something to him, I made him uneasy. What could it be?

We forget to think about the third option, which is: last night one of the kids got up and wasn't feeling well, he had to calm him and care for him. Five minutes before they left the house the boy wet his pants. He needed a full change of clothes. In the car the children were behaving wild, and because of the long night the parents got tired and argued in the morning.

Now we see them at congregation, the same family... I hope we do not expect them to be jumping for joy.

## **Let the Person Without Problems Cast the First Stone**

The same can happen in marriage. The couple meet up for a date, the wife wants to talk, to share, to be close to her husband. The husband feels distant and not very attentive, even on the ride home the husband feels like he's somewhere else.

The wife thinks - does my husband still love me? Does he want me? Do I still interest him? How can I fix the situation, why doesn't he share with me how he's feeling? In short - a first-rate disaster!

The husband thinks - the computer at work crashed - how do I save the data on the old computer and move it to a new one? And how much does a new computer cost?

If only we were to adhere to these two rules, "Do not judge your fellow until you come to his place," and "...judge every person as meritorious."

I think our community life, and our social lives, will be much better and closer.

We judge each other without knowing each other adequately. We do not even have a quarter of the evidence we need to formulate an opinion and do justice.

We tend to judge people about their problems and what they do not do right, but Yeshua warns us and says, “What about your own problems? Are you taking care of them?”

Let the person without problems cast the first stone.

Shabbat Shalom.

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