

Volume III Issue 21
Parashat Shofetim

READ IT
UP 



THE LEARN IT UP NEWSLETTER

Read it Up

Being Our Own Judges By Brain Hematian

As we celebrate Rosh Chodesh Elul and begin the introspection and self-correction that helps us prepare for the High Holidays, I could not help but wonder about the connection between judges and officials and the onset of the High Holiday season. What do judges have to do with the obligation of *teshuvah*, the process of preparing our hearts to re-connect with God, community, and even ourselves?

I suppose that some might want to tell me that the answer is easy – after all is this not the time when God judges us, one by one, determining who will live and who will die? But, I am not sure the God I believe in sits as a judge on a throne, waiting for forty days to issue a verdict. There is, I think, more to this connection of judges and the reading of the *parasha* just after Rosh Chodesh Elul. And, so I turn once again to the opening words.

“*Shoftim v’shotrim titein LEKHA* - You should appoint judges and officials...” Looking at the Hebrew words and their meaning, the word “*lekha* {for you, individually},” seems superfluous and disjointed. After all, this is a commandment to the community, the collective, and could have been stated simply “appoint judges and officers”! Why did the Torah add the word: “*lekha* – for YOU” as if to imply this is an obligation for each and every individual?

The eighteenth century Hasidic commentary Toldot Yaakov Yosef (a disciple of the Baal Shem Tov) offers one explanation. *Lekha*, he says, is intended to say: for you, for yourself. As if to say, you should appoint judges within yourself. Every person has the obligation to sit in judgment of him/herself and his/her own actions. As humans, we regularly adjudicate situations and actions in our lives. Sometimes we deliberate, considering all possibilities; other times we act on impulse. Either way, we are accountable for our

decisions and we benefit when we reflect after the fact, consider the consequences of our choices, and seek ways to continue to learn and grow.

For some of us, we do indeed judge ourselves. For many, however, judging others is so much easier. So, Toldot Yaakov Yosef continues with another important lesson about what it means for each of us to appoint internal judges:

First judge yourself, and, using the same yardstick, judge others. Do not be lenient with your faults while judging harshly the same faults in others; do not overlook sin in yourself while demanding perfection of others.

We have all experienced moments when the desire to rebuke or criticize someone else consumes us, especially when we think we are doing so out of love. Sometimes we need a reminder to see the same beauty in others that we see in ourselves and that we want reflected back to us from other people. No one of us is perfect, not the man in the mirror, or the man sitting next to you.

Occasionally, we are our own weakest judges. Unintentionally, we harm others or ourselves. We have difficulty seeing the beauty inside others, or ourselves, and we are misled by our best intentions. For those moments, I would like to add this other understanding of the idea that each of us appoints our own judges.

In this month of Elul and throughout the year, we need also to seek our individual judges from amongst our friends, families, colleagues, or community members who can help prevent us from making decisions that are not truly just. With the loving companionship of people who care, we can change. We can grow. We can become more just in our assessments of ourselves and others.

Shabbat Shalom!

Mashal of the Week

Imagine you were cast away on an island. You have no one to speak with, but you are able to find food and water. The life is actually quite comfortable, even though you have are alone and have a strong longing for human company. One day, you realize that although there is an abundance of fruits on the island, more than you can eat, you never have a desire for any of them. You take what you need, and no more.

You contrast this to the life you lived before you came to this island: each person fighting with the next to make more money, to outdo everyone else. What's the purpose? They have enough resources for themselves and their families, what's the point of competition? Especially when it gets to the point where the jealousy brings you to hurt others to take advantage of them. So silly!

You don't need anything more than what you need on this island, and you feel no need to compete with anyone since there is no one but you! What a blessing, you think.

This observation applies to our daily lives as well. If no one else was around, we wouldn't feel the urge to compete. Jealousy seems futile in this light, accomplishing nothing. What if we were all to only take what we need, and no more? Wouldn't that make the world a better place? Less jealousy, hatred, feuds.

If we can imagine to ourselves each time we feel the jealousy bubbling up: "I have what I need, it does me no good to feel jealous," the benefits would be boundless.



Meet the Rabbi...

Menasseh b. Israel

Rabbi Menasseh is a little-known though nevertheless important Sephardic rabbi from the Netherlands. He dabbled in kabbalah, wrote many books, was a successful diplomat, and ran a printing press. His works and accomplishments attest to his greatness.

Brief Bio & Accomplishments:

- Born 1604 in the Madeira Islands, Portugal and died in the Netherlands in 1657.
- Menasseh began speaking in public and writing books from a very young age.
- Some historians believe that Menasseh was instrumental in the re-admittance of Jews to England in 1655.
- Founded the first Jewish Hebrew printing press in Amsterdam, and printed books in many other languages as well.

Famous Works:

- **The Conciliator** – A work dedicated to reconciling all the apparent contradictions in the *Tanakh*. This book won Menasseh much popularity, and was writ-

ten when he was of a young age.

- **Mikveh Israel (Hope of Israel)** – Meant to explain the believed relation of the Native Americans to the Lost Tribes of Israel.

Interesting Tidbits:

- Was a friend of the famous artist Rembrandt, and even helped the latter with some of his biblical paintings by providing the Hebrew text.
- His infamous student, Baruch Spinoza, was excommunicated several times, by several communities, for his theology of "God as nature."
- Married the granddaughter of the Don Isaac Abarbanel, a famous Torah commentator and statesman.

Menasseh b. Israel's accomplishments inspire us to push ourselves. We realize because of them that we can each achieve more. He was involved in many different fields, and impacted the lives of countless others. May we strive to emulate his ways!



Questions? Comments? Ideas? Email us at MYCRiU@gmail.com



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Contributors: Nathan Zaboulani, Oren Heskia, Shawn Aziz, Yosef Zarnighian