

## This Week's Parshah - Parshas Shoftim

Kindly take a moment to study MISHNAS CHAYIM in the merit of  
Tzvi ben Osher a"h

a fellow Jew who passed away with no relatives to arrange Torah study on behalf of his *neshamah*

### Sane Judgment

There is an aspect of this week's *parshah* which – as shall be demonstrated later – sheds much light on some fundamental issues concerning *emunah* (faith).

#### *Ani Ma'amin* (I Believe)...

To say that *emunah* is a cornerstone of what it means to be a Jew may be somewhat of an understatement. The import it is accorded by the Sages is revealed by the Mishnah in Sanhedrin, wherein an apparent contradiction appears. The Mishnah states (10:1):

כָּל יִשְׂרָאֵל יוֹשֵׁב חֵלֶק לְעוֹלָם הַבָּא, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר (ישעיהו ט) וְעַמִּי בְּלֹם צְדִיקִים לְעוֹלָם יִרְשׁוּ אֶרֶץ... וְאֵלֹהֵי שָׂאֵין לָהֶם חֵלֶק לְעוֹלָם  
הַבָּא הָאֲמֵר... אֵין תּוֹרָה מִן הַשָּׁמַיִם, וְאִפְיָקוּרוֹס...

“Every member of Klal Yisrael (the collective Jewish nation) has a designated portion in the World to Come, as the verse states, ‘And all of Your nation are righteous; they will inherit the Land of Eternity...’ (*Yeshayah 60:21*). The following individuals do not possess a portion in the World to Come: One who denies... the Divine origin of the Torah, and an *apikores* (heretic)...”

The Mishnah begins with a proclamation that every Jew is entitled to his share in the World to Come. Hardly one line later, the Mishnah starts to list those who do *not* have such a privilege! But from the Rambam (*Peirush Hamishnayos*) it is clear that these two statements pose no contradiction, and his words confirm the central role *emunah* plays. *Every* member of Klal Yisrael is entitled to a portion in the World to Come. One who is given to heretical beliefs, however, loses his eligibility for one simple reason: he is no longer considered part of Klal Yisrael. By abandoning his faith, he has effectively removed himself from “the fold”. The Rambam in this familiar section lists the thirteen tenets to which an individual must subscribe in order to retain his standing as a member of the *klal*.

#### Can One Be Told What to Think?

But this very notion gives rise to some very poignant issues, as R' Elchonon Wasserman (beginning of *Kovetz Ma'amarim*) points out: How is it even conceivable that a person is *obligated* to believe and can be held accountable, for a lack thereof? If there is an individual who – for one reason or another – does not “believe,” then how can he be compelled to fulfill this obligation? In his mind – perish the thought – there is no One Who is obligating him! Must he fear retribution if he does not believe there is retribution?

Furthermore, R' Elchonon asks, it almost appears – at first glance – that a set of unfair demands are in play. A Jew becomes obligated to fulfill all of the Torah's precepts at age thirteen. Quite obviously, the Bar-Mitzvah boy's charge includes this imperative to believe. Yet we find throughout the ages that numerous older, wiser men, including famed and seasoned philosophers (e.g., Aristotle), did not accede to the belief in the Creator. How can we expect some thirteen-year-old kid to figure out what the greatest philosophers could not and hold him

responsible with the most dire of consequences?

In this classic essay, R' Elchonon lays down some surprising – yet simple and straightforward – principles. The answer, he explains, is – quite frankly – that any dummy can figure out that there is a Creator. In fact, the matter is so obvious and so self-evident, that – in and of itself – the adoption of true beliefs requires little to no effort. In other words, at their core, all people who possess even a modicum of sanity *automatically* and inherently *know* there is a Creator.

Paraphrasing R' Elchonon's insightful passage, we consider the following scenario: Two individuals taking a walk find a watch lying on the ground. "How did that get there?" one of them asks. His companion attributes its existence to a combination of elements: the wind blowing the sand and minerals around for a number of eons, the occurrence of some hurricanes, plus a couple of earthquakes for good measure – all combined in a remarkable confluence of events to produce this contraption that is capable of telling time. How would any individual of even modest intelligence react to such a convoluted explanation? It would take little prodding to convince the listener that his friend was a surefire candidate for the funny farm. It doesn't take a rocket scientist to recognize that the watch was crafted by a watchmaker.

And so it is, R' Elchonon concludes, with the world at large: only the evidence is infinitely more abundant. The skies, the stars, the trees, the mountains, the sun, the moon, the sea, the earth's creatures, etc. etc. – these are constant reminders and testimonials that all of this Creation was fashioned by the Master Creator. Surely a Bar-Mitzvah boy, who can figure out that a house was made by a carpenter, can likewise see plainly that the complex and wonderful Creation that surrounds him was made by the Creator.

### **Losing One's Mind**

So what about the multitudes claiming to be atheists, whose ranks include numerous geniuses and great thinkers? It is for this point that we turn to a verse in this week's *parshah*, which illuminates the issue through a clear directive: "You (judges) shall not take bribes; for bribery blinds the eyes of the wise..." (*Devarim 16:19*). This prohibition applies to even the most upstanding and honest judges. For even someone of the caliber of a Moshe or an Aharon, who receives even a minimal benefit from a certain party, will be automatically predisposed in favor of his benefactor. Human nature is subject to certain laws of nature, and through this prohibition, the Torah reveals that the judgment of someone accorded a "perk" – no matter how miniscule – will be unavoidably clouded.

The true obstacle to *emunah*, R' Elchonon explains, is not an inherent difficulty to believe. As demonstrated, it is simply impossible for any intellectually honest individual to eschew belief in the Creator. The obligation to believe is sound because it is basically unavoidable.

The real issue is the factor mentioned by our *parshah*: *shochad* (bribery), which clouds the thinking of otherwise rational, intelligent beings. And it is the pleasures of this world – and the prospect of relinquishing their unbridled pursuit – which form the *shochad* confronting each individual. Accepting a Creator means acceding to His Will, and this is where the challenge arises. Those who bristle at the thought of restrictions on their "freedoms" – *what, I can't do what I want, whenever I want???* – will have a tough time accepting the reality of their true purpose in this world. Rather than subjugating their will to that of their Creator, their minds are befuddled by the lure of their whims and desires.

While Aristotle may have possessed superior intellect, it was corrupted by his unwillingness to curb his animalistic

passions. A Jew, young or old, whose belief is firm, has all the hallmarks of a true *mentsch*.