



PARSHAT SHOFTIM

BREAKING OUT

In *parshat Shoftim*, the Torah briefly reiterates the commandment of “cities of refuge” (ערי מקלט), wherein an individual who accidentally murdered another must take refuge. This commandment is first mentioned and described in length in *parshat Massei*, and is repeated once again in the Book of Joshua. In *Massei* and in the Book of Joshua, the individual who has committed manslaughter is described as “one who accidentally afflicts the soul” (מכה נפש בשגגה); he who commits intentional murder is called “one who afflicts the soul” (מכה נפש).

The Lubavitcher Rebbe explains that this commandment and all that it entails regarding manslaughter is relevant even today. He comments that the greater an individual’s spiritual sensitivity, the more he feels that the title “one who afflicts a soul” applies to himself, for he too has afflicted his soul (and that of others indirectly) by remaining in his comfort zone, unable and unwilling to break out and aspire for more. In fact, nowhere is this sensitivity greater than in the perfectly righteous individual, the *tzadik*, who even though he might be a leader of his generation, lives with the knowledge that he has afflicted the soul more than any other. The lower the level of a *tzadik* (and the entire Jewish people are *tzadikim*), the less sensitive he is to this and the less he can aspire to break out of his comfort zone.

It is the role of the Mashiach to help these *tzadikim* taste the sweetness of *teshuvah*, the act of returning and growing closer to God by aspiring higher, by making them sensitive to how they too have afflicted the soul. Acknowledging how each of us has, at his or her own spiritual level, afflicted the soul requires us to break out of our comfort zone and be able to look at ourselves with a truly Messianic eye. This type of spiritual work is most appropriate for both the 3

weeks between the 17th of *Tamuz* and *Tisha B'av* (when *parshat Massei* is read) and the month of *Elul* (when *parshat Shoftim* is read), the two times of the year that call upon us to break out of our habits and spiritual straits.

In all, we find 7 levels of increasing sensitivity to having afflicted the soul; naturally, they correspond to the seven lower *sefirot*, from kingdom to loving-kindness.

Kingdom. At the lowest level of sensitivity a person feels perfectly comfortable with himself without a sense of being confined by spiritual barriers. He does not experience how his service of God is less than it might be. He might be convinced that he has already attained the highest level of Divine service, for he already learns Torah and keeps the commandments to their minute details. In short, he does not strive to elevate himself at all, feeling that his current level is just fine. Such is the experience of the *sefirah* of kingdom, which because it faces downwards, cannot sense the Divine light above and does not realize how limited a view of reality it really has.

Foundation. A bit more sensitive is the individual who knows that he must constantly strive to ascend higher and higher in his Divine service. But, because he also knows that even the greatest of journeys starts with a single step and that the spiritual ladder has many rungs, he does not stress about his current level convinced that the climb upwards must be orderly; there is no need to leap forward. This level describes the underlying experience of the *sefirah* of foundation, which is all about order and sequence.

Acknowledgment and Victory. Still more sensitive to the affliction of the soul is one who is moderately bothered by his present spiritual identity and so waits patiently for the first chance to jump out of his

might גבורה current state of spirituality is an affront to God	loving-kindness חסד current state afflicts others therefore flees to a city of refuge
beauty תפארת current state of spirituality is an illusion	
acknowledgment הוד patiently anticipating the chance to leap	victory ניצח desire to leap right now
foundation יסוד ordered progress	
kingdom מלכות no sense of confinement	

spiritual skin. Even more sensitive is he who experiences his present state as a spiritual prison and feels the need, at this very moment to leap forward in search of a higher more authentic identity. These two levels correspond to the *sefirot* acknowledgment and victory, which work in conjunction. These two *sefirot* are described as situated “outside the body” (i.e., the torso, which corresponds to the *sefirah* of beauty). Thus, in their purest form they reflect a feeling of the body as constricting caused by the fact that the *sefirah* of understanding, the source of all feelings of *teshuvah* (return to God) extends all the way to acknowledgment imbuing both acknowledgment and victory together with the prerogative to jump out of their skin.

Beauty. Higher still is he who not only aspires to break out of his current spiritual state, realizing how constricted and limited it is, but realizes that everything that he currently calls “serving God” is nothing but a flight of fancy. The entire image he and others may have of himself as one who strives to serve the Almighty is simply an illusion. His sensitivity to the affliction of the soul brings him to realize that he has not even begun to travel a spiritual path and is as far from authentic service as can be. The *sefirah* of beauty is the source of our powers of imagination and false self-image which leads us to boast of having attained levels we have not.

Might. At this heightened state of sensitivity, the individual feels that not only has he not started on the path of serving the Almighty, but that on the contrary, all of his actions to date, having been inauthentic at their core have been nothing but a disservice to the Master of the Universe. Based on the verse, “For there is no righteous person who has done good and not sinned,” the Ba'al Shem Tov taught that even while doing good, a person can be sinning in that very act of

goodness. This occurs when the motivation for the good action is anything but God's commanding it. Performing actions for any other motivation imbues them with a point of sin. This level of sensitivity corresponds to the *sefirah* of might, the faculty where “harsh judgments” (resulting in such deep self-criticism) manifest.

Loving-Kindness. Finally, at the very highest level of sensitivity, there is the most beloved individual (“All sevenths are beloved”) who, due to his tremendous love of the Jewish people, feels that with every moment he is responsible for actually afflicting the souls of Israel with his actions. This special individual is constantly concerned that by not being part of the solution (bringing the true and complete redemption closer by serving God), he is part of the problem (resulting in the prolonging of our exile). This righteous individual experiences then the need to flee into a city of refuge to save himself and others from the avenger, the great prosecutor that pursues him. Of course this final level corresponds to the *sefirah* of loving-kindness, as it is motivated by love of others.

It is only the individual who has reached the highest level of sensitivity to his own limitations and spiritual straits that can, with God's help, leap to an authentic state of boundless possibility. This state is symbolized by his sign from above (in practice, the death of the High Priest) that he is free to leave the city of refuge; free to manifest his truly authentic self with acts of total self-sacrifice while motivated by indescribably great love. It is then, that this individual serves as a revelation of God's essentially infinite light, which itself has no bound and which was never limited by the act of contraction that started creation.

(Based on the Daily Dvar Torah from Tuesday of parshat Shoftim 5768)

Notes:

1. The Hebrew verb for “boasting” (לְהִתְפַּאֵר) stems from the same root as “beauty” (תְּפִאֲרָה).

THE REDEMPTION GROWS NEARER...

The essentially vital point of the Mashiach already exists within every Jew's heart. This point is described by the sages with the words, “David, the king of Israel lives and endures.” This vitality is merely concealed by layers of extraneous shells that only need to be peeled off. The Mashiach is not only out there, but in each of us as well. All we need to do is reveal him.

(From the farbrengen of the 10th of Shevat 5768)

For the success of our dear friend Dr. Yaakov Sollins, in all things, material and spiritual, especially in regards to family and offspring