

Parshas Shoftim

This week's Parsha is Shoftim, and we just came from welcoming Chodesh Elul, as we wind down the year and head toward Tishrei, which marks the days of Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, and Sukkot. The Parsha begins with the establishment of the rule to "appoint Judges and officers in all your cities, which Hashem your G-d gives you, for your tribes, and they shall judge the people with righteous judgement..." (16:18). When Jews ruled their own land in ancient times, this was a literal commandment, as Rashi explains, of people who would enforce the rules of the Torah and ensure there was law and order in the cities, which Hashem gave us. This nuance matters, as it highlights that we must recognize our autonomy and rulership as divinely given when we are in physical control. In modern Israel, Halacha has, to some extent, authority over the land, but it isn't the only law¹; secular laws and courts also exist.

The Gemara quotes the Amora Shmuel in multiple places², who says, "There is no difference between this world and the days of Mashiach except for the subjugation of (foreign) kingdoms..." In one place, it quotes last

week's Parsha 15:11 (for the destitute people will not cease to exist in the land...); that is, our dominion over the land is the sign that Mashiach is here. Specifically, following the conquering of Esav (Lishpot es Har Esav). Rashi explains in our Parsha that "bechol Shearacha" (all your gates) means all your cities. The Alter Rebbe in Tanya draws a metaphor of the "Ir Ketana," the small city, referring to the body, and that there is a battle between good and evil, Nefesh Elohis and Nefesh Habihamis, that constantly wages war internally. The goal of the Benoni (which the Alter Rebbe suggests is every Jew) is to ensure that the authority of the Nefesh Habihamis (animal soul) does not have rulership over the small city. The Alter Rebbe constantly reminds us through metaphor and anthropomorphic description of the war waged within. Hashem helps in that battle when a person (such as during davening or learning) has the Divine Soul ruling in that moment, even though after prayer and learning the person may return to their mundane ways and possibly allow the animal soul to rule. The goal is to constantly train oneself to be bent on the side of the Divine, such that every aspect of a person's day is consumed by the divine soul's mission rather than the

¹ Side note, the Lubavitcher Rebbe would provide guidance and clarity on how to enact policy and regulations in the land that weren't politically driven, rather sourced in Halacha and the Torah. People have politicized Chabad's approach to the Land of Israel, or in general, but the critical point to note is any adages or directives by the Rebbe

were non-political, and were Halachically based, and therefore at times could be viewed as either "liberal" or "conservative", but critically are not meant to be defined by politics.

² Sanhedrin 99a; Berachos 34b; Pesachim 68a; and Shabbos 63a (and possibly other places)

human/animal that is consumed by the physical.

When the Parsha begins, as Jews in the Diaspora and in Golus, we can therefore read the pesukim to mean that we establish judges and enforcers within our own city to enforce the laws of the Torah and to ensure the Shelita and Kingship of the Divine over the animal. The importance of this idea is that there is power over us externally and internally. We cannot prevent the external elements of the mundane world that rule over us, and this is the definition of being in Golus. But we have power over our Ir Ketana (small city), that is, us, and we have the ability to set ourselves free of the subjugation of the “nations of the world” (Nefesh Habihamis), over the spiritual, divine soul, which ultimately is what we want to cleave to and strive toward. This pathway and work will set us free internally from a golus life to a life of Mashiach. We must allow for the Mind to be Shoilet (overcome) the heart’s desires, which may drive the animal soul’s power over the ir ketana. By seeing this Parsha not as a historical recounting but rather as a lesson in our service to Hashem, especially with the definitions and guidance of Tanya, the Pesukim take on a different meaning, and we can use the support of Shmuel’s opinion in the Gemara that Mashiach is here when the dominion of the ‘nations of the world’ is overcome.

Connecting this with Bereishis (as we’ve been doing thematically), there is a direct link to the prophecy told to Rivka about two warring nations battling in her womb. As the Alter Rebbe quotes from Bereishis 25:23, the battle between Yakov and Esav allegorically represents the battle between good and evil in a person’s body. The Alter Rebbe argues that Yakov’s prevailing over Esav doesn’t completely vanquish evil; it’s only dominance. The difference is that dominance doesn’t eradicate the enemy. According to Shmuel’s interpretation, it doesn’t seem that the foreign entities will be eradicated; rather, we won’t be subservient to them. That means that we can, beginning with our Ir Ketana, establish dominance over the Esav within and use our Shoftim and Shotrim to establish rulership over the foreign leadership, as the Alter Rebbe guides us. When we do this, Lishpot Es Har Esav, we will usher in Mashiach in a dominant way that is obvious to all and to the world, the true revelation of Mashiach, as the Parsha says 17:8, that with regard to matters that need clarification, you shall go to the place that Hashem chose, meaning the Beis Hamikdash, to establish the verdict. Although this Posuk is referring to a literal obligation of how to assess a stalemate, there is something broader in the Posuk: when a matter of Halacha is concealed from you, turn to Hashem, as the blessing is, that we have the Mashiach to look forward to, when all the matters of concealment will be

revealed. The rest of the Parsha discusses refraining from acts of the nations of the world, and how to follow the laws of the land and establish the right way of following Halacha. Furthermore, the Parsha deals with conquering the land and going out to war, which connects to the battle within, showing that there is a way to succeed in the battle of good over bad (Yakov over Esav) and establish dominance over the nations, such that we live in a Messianic era, as suggested by Shmuel.

This Parsha, falling in the month of Elul, is a lesson in how to vanquish evil and assert the dominion of good, so that we can greet Tishrei and the new year ready to establish rulership over our Ir Ketana and live in a Messianic existence, so that the world can be revealed as Mashiach on a global, general level, so that we are truly redeemed from Golus. So we shouldn't just look at the Parsha as a snapshot of laws pertaining to the land of Israel, but rather as a lesson in our internal allegorical battle, which also extends beyond our bodies, such that there is a revelation of Mashiach on a protis level, but also on a general level. This battle and lesson derive from Umilom Milom Yematz, which describes the battle between Yakov and Esav, good over evil, and the Torah elucidates how to live (by Halacha), especially when battling and going out to war with our enemies.

Good Shabbos