

Shoftim – 5782

“You shall appoint magistrates and officials for your tribes”. Thus begins our parsha this week as it has been translated in the Eitz Chaim Chumash. In Hebrew, the verse reads somewhat differently and, to my mind, tellingly. First of all, the Hebrew for Judge is indeed shofet. However, in Hebrew, Shotrim does not mean officials but guardians. And furthermore, it doesn't say in Hebrew to appoint but rather to take for yourselves. In other words, we begin with the commandment to find from within our people, judges, and guardians, but not guardians against the threats from without, in other words, guards on the borders, but threats from within, guardians against those who would challenge the underpinnings of peace and security within the tribes of Israel.

In that same paragraph, we are called upon to seek justice..... Tzedek, Tzedek Tidroff – justice, justice, you shall pursue. To my mind this is self-evident, and the sages and commentators have homed in on just how much these words have impacted the world view of the Jewish people and the evolution of its culture. I don't have to remind you how often the Jewish people have been in the forefront of EVERY movement to right the wrongs of society and tikkun olam, the repair of the world, our role as HaShem's emissaries on the planet has been referred to so often, I need not dwell on it here. But what about the concept of guardian?

I have already intimated that the use of the word guardian, in the Hebrew, is meant to draw attention to the threats from within the people, not the dangers lurking beyond their borders. WE have already been promised by HaShem that, as long as we follow his laws and observe his commandments, he will protect us from our enemies. That. protection might

be due to divine intervention, for sure, but most often it really is due to our strength of character, our self-pride and cohesion that will make it impossible for our culture and polity to die. And for sure, history bears that out. We are still here, as a people, standing proud as Jews, fulfilling the mission to be a light onto the nations. But that would not be possible if we were not also guardians against the influences from outside our peoplehood, for want of a better way to describe it,

So, what does our parsha warn us to be on guard against? If you read the parsha carefully, it won't take you long to determine the answer to that question. EGYPT. We are reminded time and time again that we must differentiate ourselves from what was the most powerful civilization and polity at the time of Moses and the Exodus. But it is not military might that we are to guard against. Absolutely not. Rather we are to guard against the influences of Egyptian culture, religion, and social organization. Remember we have already learned that there were Israelites who didn't want to leave Egypt. Why? Because they were lured into believing that things in Egypt were better. They did not want to dare to be different. The same thing happened when Cyrus freed the Jews from their exile in Babylonia so they could return to the Holy Land. However, that time a Jewish presence remained behind because by that time there was a devotion to the tradition.

The difference between the Israelites left in Egypt and the Jews who stayed behind in Babylonia helps understand just what the concept of being on guard really is meant to imply. Moshe on behalf of HaShem warned against the false attractions of life in Egypt. Everything about that way of life, but especially the belief in more than one god, was falsely attractive. Also remember what happened at Mount Sinai when Moshe didn't come down fast enough to suit the people. They needed a golden calf to see and think

represented power and the solution to their problems. They didn't have faith in HaShem and in themselves. It took far too much courage and faith to be patient even though the payoff was obviously much better. If you are not sure of that, just look at our neighbours to the south. They are struggling now because a specific segment of society meets the needs of that group of people for easy answers and scapegoats, but that attraction is tearing the society apart. It is far easier to blame someone else than to realize we have only ourselves to blame. It has always been far easier to look to others rather than to look inward.

As I am writing this, I am reminded of a book that, back in the day, i.e., when I was bar mitzvah, it was very common to get as a present a book entitled *The Still Small Voice*. That book tried to teach teenagers that morality and ethics begins by listening to the still small voice of HaShem instructing us on not how to behave but how to think. In essence that is what we are trying to do during this month of Elul leading up to Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. As we have learned already from Rav Moshe among other teachers, in order to repent for our sins, we must first identify them and try to change our own behaviour. We have to look inward. When we hit our breasts during the recitation of the *Al Cheyt*, we are admitting to having committed those various sins. Atonement begins with knowing something was wrong and fixing it. In our minds first.

So, when we are told to seek our judges and guardians, *Shoftim ve Shotrim*, we really should be saying it the other way.....we need guardians to remind us of when we have gone astray against ourselves, towards the *Yetzer HaRah* and then judges to help us weigh and identify the good from the bad. There will never be justice in the world unless we can look at ourselves and our behaviours and find those things that we can change so

that justice becomes more apparent between each other, between nations and between ourselves and HaShem. Shabbat Shalom.