

PARSHAT SHOFTIM
SEPTEMBER 3, 2011
RABBI VERNON KURTZ

On Tuesday and Wednesday of this week we began the Hebrew month of Elul. On Wednesday, the actual first day of the month, we commenced blowing the Shofar reminding us that Rosh Hashana is only four weeks away. We also add Psalm 27 both morning and evening in order to get us into the mood for the impending Days of Awe. Our Sephardic brothers and sisters begin the recitation of Selichot, the penitential prayers, already from the beginning of the month. In our Ashkenazic tradition, it was felt that commencing with the Saturday night before the holiday there was enough time for us to ready our souls for the Day of Judgment.

Our Torah reading for this Shabbat is in the main involved with concepts of justice, ethics and morality that are to be established in Israelite society. However, it is possible to look beyond the words to see some hints of the coming Days of Awe and how we should work to improve our conduct as we prepare ourselves for these days of repentance, meditation and contemplation.

The Torah reading begins with the words translated by our Etz Hayim Humash following the new JPS translation: “You shall appoint magistrates and officials for your tribes, in all the settlements that the Lord your God is giving you, and they shall govern the people with due justice.” A more literal translation would render the statement in this fashion: “Judges and officers shall you appoint for yourself in all your gates, which the Lord your God gives you, throughout your tribes; and they shall judge the people with a just judgment.”

The locale of the gate is a very interesting one in the concept of the ancient justice system. According to the Semitic surroundings in which the Bible found itself, the area of the entrance to a walled settlement was a place where people would come together to conduct their commercial and legal affairs. For example, Boaz and the unnamed redeemer engaged in a transfer of real estate and marriage rites for Ruth at the gate, in the presence of ten representative elders. In Proverbs 31, the Woman of Valor poem, the husband’s position “in the gates” shows him to be a prominent citizen and the woman’s works are publicly recognized “in the gates.” This represented the public sphere and justice was to predominate at the very entrance to the walled city, at the gates of the town and village, in the public arena for all to see.

Pietistic and ethical philosophy in Jewish tradition, known commonly as Mussar, attached a meaning to the concept of gates which may not be literal and represent justice per se, but reminds one of the importance of living moral and ethical lives in all spheres of influence and everyday activities. In our own Etz Hayim Humash Rabbi Harold Kushner, in his comments below the line, quotes the Sh’nei Luhot Ha-B’rit, written by Rabbi Isaiah ben Abraham Ha-Levi Horowitz in the 16th Century, who suggests that we must set guardians at the gates affecting our lives in a more figurative sense. These guardians stand at the very openings of temptation which can lead us astray and away

from a proper path of living. The Shela states that the mouth is a gate. We can offer words of consolation, support and assurance to others and we can also offer words of malicious gossip, hearsay and disrespect. The ear is a gate. We can listen to words of Torah, learning and intellectual enrichment or we can hear words of malicious gossip, hatred and enmity. The eye is a gate. We can see the best in others or we can look for their downfall and their demise. The pocket is a gate. We can extend our financial means for constructive and worthwhile purposes or we can close our pockets to those who are in need and reach out for our support and assistance. Each of these gates tells a great deal about us and how we live our lives. We must be guardians of each of these gates. They may not have been literally meant by the Torah portion of this morning; however, it is clear that if we have our moral compasses in order then justice will readily flow in our community and our society.

The classical moralist philosopher of the 11th Century Bachya Ibn Pakuda lists ten gates in his book *“The Duties of the Heart”*, which prompt man to guard against evil. These gates correspond to the ten fundamental principles which, according to his view, constitute man’s spiritual life. In ascending order of spiritual importance he lists the attributes that are necessary for a belief in G-d and for living a moral life. The seventh gate is known as *“Sha’ar Ha-Teshuva”*, the Gate of Repentance. All of us, even the pious, belong to the human race and all of us make mistakes, in theological terms, we sin. These sins, both of omission and commission, should be redressed by repentance, by recognizing the consciousness of the act, the determination to change our conduct, the confession of sin and a perfect change of heart. As he writes: *“The Creator has favored you with wisdom, understanding and knowledge, and thus made you superior to other creatures. In His compassion for you and in gently guiding you, God has urged you to go the right way, and has shown you the path to your happiness.”*

Each of us enters and exits gates throughout the course of our lifetime. As one gate closes another one opens. New possibilities and challenges are presented to us each and every day. How do we approach these new challenges? With what sense of moral behavior can we judge our lives as we move from gate to gate during the course of our lifetimes? The month of Elul reminds us that the Days of Awe are closely at hand. It is time for us to evaluate our lives, our conduct and what motivates us in this world.

The Maggid of Horodna told the following parable: *“A man went down to the river to bathe. Taking off his clothes he placed them in the bushes on the bank and with his bathing suit on he entered the water. Suddenly he was caught up in a whirlpool and dragged down to the depths. With his last ounce of strength, he struggled against the current and cried out to those standing on the bank, ‘watch out for my clothes. Make sure they aren’t stolen.’”*

“Watch out for yourself,” those standing on the river bank responded. *“Rescue yourself from the raging waters. Struggle against the current and extricate yourself from the whirlpool. Concentrate on the main thing, not on what is unimportant. If you drown, you won’t have any use for your clothes.”*

The Maggid suggested that this story teaches us that we must concentrate on what is really important. Too often we look to the ephemeral, the transitory and the temporal rather than that which is enduring and eternal. The gates that open before us allow us to enter through them with full cognizance of the free choice that is at our command. We can use our mouths, ears, eyes and pockets for good or for ill. The choice is up to us. Should we make mistakes we are given the opportunity to ask for forgiveness from our fellow human being and from G-d. In that way, we energize the Divine image that is within us and in the world at-large. During the month of Elul and the subsequent Days of Awe we are asked to concentrate on that which is important in our lives and not be led astray by that which is trivial and unessential.

Last Monday night I visited our good friend Mel Sered as he was sitting shiva for his sister. Mel and Hedy's son-on-law is State Senator Jeff Schoenberg. I have known Jeff for many years as I co-officiated at his wedding here at Beth El to Lynne. After the Ma'ariv service I approached Jeff to ask him to how he was doing. Jeff responded, "How is your neshama, your soul?" What a great question. I responded that since we are commencing the month of Elul I have to work on it in preparation of the High Holy Days. That is the real question of life: "How is your neshama?" Are you tending to the welfare of your soul?

The sounding of the Shofar and the recitation of Psalm 27, herald a month of preparation for Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur. I pray that we take their messages to heart and ennoble our lives and those around us through ethical living and moral behavior. May we show respect for one another and for G-d, and may we use the gates of our lives for the pursuit of morality and ethical living which will ultimately lead to a just society for all.

May it be a blessed year for us, our families and all of Israel.