

(Dvar Torah continued from the front page...

Psalm 146, which must be the source for the rabbinic blessing. The one who takes a bribe, then, is doing the opposite of what God does. The mistake that the verse from our parashah warns us against is even more than a matter of failing to imitate God. One who takes a bribe still was made in God's image, but they turn away from imitating God and their behavior is a perverse inversion of God's will.

In Midrash Tanchuma, Parashat *Shofetim*, 8, we find the following explanation: "As soon as a judge has given away her heart for a bribe she becomes blind in judgment and is no longer able to judge the case truthfully." The verdict of the case is not the only value here. There is another value, *judging truthfully*, which must be upheld.

This other value is the value of unbiased judgment. Even a judge who is biased can deliver the right verdict, but such a judge cannot judge truthfully. Freedom from bias is a crucial aspirational value of all justice systems, and it is also a value for all people, whether we sit as judges or not. Rabbi Avraham of Sochotchov, the student and son-in-law of the Kotsker Rebbe, explains why bias is such a serious matter: "When a person is blind, he realizes it and will ask someone who can see to help him. But if a person has a bias, the bias blinds him to such an extent that he does not even realize that he is blind. He feels that what he perceives is reality and will refuse to listen to others" (*Growth through Torah*, by Zelig Pliskin).

Whether we serve as judges or not - most of us not - bias is a distortion of reality that distances us from the truth. We might pray for God to open our eyes. Even when we bless God for being the One who gives sight to the blind, *poqe'ach 'ivrim*, we might think of truth and our desire to stay close to it. We might combine two of our morning blessings and say, "Blessed are You, Hashem our God, Sovereign of the universe, who releases us from our biases, making us aware of the truth." And maybe, if we're really serious, we might take a little time to examine our own biases, our own blind spots.

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TORAH SPARKS

Parashat Mishpatim

Shabbat Shekalim

Shabbat Mevarekhim Hahodesh

February 22, 2020 | 27 Shevat 5780

Annual | Exodus 21:1-24:18 (Etz Hayim p. 456-480; Hertz p. 306-322)

Triennial | Exodus 21:1-22:3 (Etz Hayim p. 456-465; Hertz p. 306-311)

Maftir | Exodus 30:11-16 (Etz Hayim p. 523-524; Hertz p. 352-352)

Haftarah | 2 Kings 12:1-17 (Etz Hayim p. 1276-1279 Hertz p. 992-995)

D'var Torah: Blindness We Cannot See

Rabbi David Finkelstein, *Conservative Yeshiva Alumnus and Rabbi of Temple Beth Israel in Waltham, MA*

Each morning, we say *birkot hashachar*, the morning blessings, some of us in shul and others before arriving. Among those blessings is the one in which we praise God for giving sight to the blind, *poqe'ach 'ivrim*. This blessing is striking in its simplicity. All sight comes from God as a gift, except, of course, to those who are born blind. The latter thought can be troubling. Does a Jew who was born blind still say this *berachah*? But maybe this blessing isn't exclusively about sight. Could it be that blindness stands in here for all the senses, even non-physical ones?

In this week's parashah, *Mishpatim*, the first parashah in the Torah that is comprised mostly of laws, the above phrase from our morning blessings gets turned on its head: "You shall not take a bribe, for a bribe blinds those who can see and perverts the words of the righteous" (Exodus 23:8). In Hebrew, the phrase "blinds those who can see" is *ye'ahvair piqchim*. The idea that God gives sight to the blind is not original in our morning blessing. We see that notion in

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D'var Haftarah: Past & Present

Rabbi Mordechai Silverstein, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty

Does history repeat itself? Not exactly, but certain symptoms of the human condition are recognizable throughout the generations. And on this matter, reading the Book of Kings proves to be a primer on the inner workings of governance both for good and bad. This week, we begin the cycle of the four special haftarot which precede Pesah. The first of these, for Shabbat Shekalim, opens with the tale of the measures taken to protect the heir-apparent to the throne of the House of David from the evil machinations of his grandmother who wanted him dead so she might usurp the throne. The fact that there was political intrigue in the royal family goes to illustrate that even the reign of the House of David was not always idyllic.

A few details are in order. Not unsurprisingly, neither Israel nor Judah lived in a vacuum. In order to survive, alliances were necessary and alliances required royal marriages. One such marriage brought Athaliah, a daughter of the house of Omri from Israel, into a marriage with Jehoram of Judah. When Jehoram died, he was succeeded by his son, Ahaziah, son of Athaliah. When Ahaziah was killed in a coup against the king of the northern kingdom (I told you things were complicated), Athaliah usurped the throne, killing all the royal seed (including her children and grandchildren), leaving one grandson, Jehoash, who was saved from Athaliah by his aunt and hidden in the Temple, and anointed as king. Think of it, the line of King David was tainted by these terrible events.

I imagine that those living through this horrendous episode thought their society was disintegrating. One could very easily fall into a state of despair and desperation. The very foundations of society were torn asunder. Society was saved by people who were willing to step up to the responsibility to respond to the wrongdoings and to commit themselves to restore sanity, stability and civil behavior to their world.

The idealized past never really existed despite our desire to romanticize it. In that sense, it is no different from the present. The message of the story is that when the world becomes dark, society has to work hard to fix things, to pick up the pieces and make them right and continue forward, hopefully to a better future. It is in our hands to restore honor and dignity when they have been lost.

At the Conservative Yeshiva in Jerusalem, we offer students of all backgrounds an opportunity to engage with Jewish texts in a dynamic, inclusive, and collaborative environment. We help students gain the skills necessary for Jewish learning and spiritual growth as individuals and in their communities in North America, Israel, and around the world.

Parashah Study: Why Not Have That Cheeseburger?

Vered Hollander-Goldfarb, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty

Text: Shmot 23:14-19

*(14) Three times in the year shall you hold Me a festival... (19) The best of the first fruit of your soil you shall bring to the house of the LORD your God. **You shall not boil a kid in its mother's milk.***

- While this passage discusses the three pilgrim holidays (Pesach, Shavuot, Succoth) it ends with a seemingly different topic. Why was the rule concerning boiling a kid in its mother's milk placed here?
- What do you think is the reason for the prohibition of boiling a kid in its mother's milk?

Commentary: Rashbam on Shmot 23:19

***You shall not boil a kid in its mother's milk** – It is common for goats to give birth to two kids together, and they were accustomed to slaughter one of them. And since there was a lot of goat milk... they would cook it in its mother's milk; and the scripture spoke according to the common practice at the time. But it is a disgrace, and excess and gluttony to eat the mother's milk with the children! And examples of this are "it and its young" (Lev.22:28 – prohibition to slaughter a bull or a sheep and its young on the same day) and 'sending away the mother bird [before taking the eggs or the young]' (Deut. 22:6-7). The Scriptures commanded this to teach you proper behavior. And since they would eat a lot of animals on the holidays, it warned in the section of the holidays not to eat a kid in its mother's milk, and this is the law for all meat in milk as our rabbis explained in [the Talmudic tractate] Hullin.*

- According to Rashbam, why was the law prohibiting the cooking of meat with milk written in this manner rather than a general prohibition regarding mixing meat and milk?
- Rashbam suggests that this and several other Mitzvot come to teach us 'proper behavior'. What does that mean? What might be the relevance for modern times?
- Why is this law placed at the end of the section about the holidays?
- This law has extensive implications for Jewish dietary laws. Does Rashbam deal with the Halacha at all? Did he know the Halacha?