

בס"ד
ר"ח אלול תש"פ
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פרשת שופטים

Parshas Shoftim begins with the commandment to appoint judges and law enforcement officials, the שופטים and the שוטרים, to enforce the fulfillment of the laws.¹ Rashi explains² that while the שופטים are judges who decide the verdict, the שוטרים are those who chastise the people in compliance with their order with rods and straps until the guilty party accepts the judge's verdict.

Every member of Klal Yisrael knows that they are obligated to fulfill the laws of the Torah and that all of the judges' rulings are based on the Torah. But if this is true, then what need is there for officers to rule with a "stick and strap" approach? Can we not simply rely on each person knowing that they need to fulfill the *mitzvos* and adhere to the Torah?

Rav Nosson Tzvi Finkel³ remarks that a person simply cannot realistically be trusted to rely upon themselves. It is a matter of human nature for a person to unburden themselves of such heavy yokes; one may come to ignore such rulings or issue a permit for themselves if they do not fear judicial coercion. The officers are the ones who constrain and coerce the congregation to comply with the commandments.

The appointment of such officers has multiple purposes. Often, people accept reinforcements upon themselves in certain aspects of life, and at first, they are easily able to fulfill their pledges and promises, as the resolution is still original and fresh in their mind; they are naturally inclined to fulfill what they accepted upon themselves. However, as time goes along, a person may weaken from a combination of distractions and nuisances that they may find themselves with, and they slack off, ultimately distancing themselves from their original commitment. This laxity alone serves as a reason for needing officers.

According to the *Sefer HaChinuch*,⁴ that the root of this mitzvah is to allow us to maintain and undergird our religion, as the fear provided by the officers and judges will be on the face of the nation. Essentially, the imposing fear will condition the people to habitually do good, and it will eventually become their nature to live a life of justice and righteousness. From here, we have yet another reason to appoint officers: to elevate a person and condition them to the level that observing all commandments in every situation and condition will be their character and nature.

While we still have literal judges who have been appointed to uphold the law, we lack contemporary שוטרים to enforce the fulfillment of mitzvos. Since it is human nature to become lax in observing the mitzvos over time, how can a person strengthen themselves to be saved from sinning without having officers to ensure that they do so? What will compel them to fulfill the *mitzvos* and make it his second nature?

Rav Nosson Tzvi Finkel provides an astounding insight on contemporary reinforcement: the modern-day שוטרים are the *ba'alei mussar*. A person continues to fortify the proper lifestyle through the learning of *mussar*, which contains the two facets that are also found with the officers in the times of the מדבר. One aspect is the "stick and strap" approach of reinforcement that yokes our hearts to be *yirei*

¹ דברים טז:יח

² רש"י דברים טז:יח ד"ה שופטים ושוטרים

³ שיחות רב נתן צבי, פרשת שופטים, מאמר "ה'שוטרים' בזמנינו - ספר המוסר"

⁴ ספר החינוך מצוה תצא

Hashem and alerts us about what may happen if we ease up on our observance. Additionally, learning *mussar* galvanizes us to shy away from a mindset of complacency, and instill within us the aspiration and ambition to elevate our *avodas Hashem*. While התמדה in learning Torah will bring a person to a state of התבוננות that allows him to reflect, only *limud mussar* will provide him with a state of constant contemplation without any weakening of the mind. If we learn *mussar* in a fixed manner, we will be able to reach this coveted state of התבוננות, which has the power to raise us from all weaknesses and decelerations and establish for us a nature of honoring Hashem's commandments.

As we enter the month of Elul, we find ourselves looking for different ways to prepare for the *Yom HaDin*. The essence of the trepidation that we feel is the knowledge that this Day of Judgement is not only for Klal Yisrael, but for all the creatures of the world, and all of creation as well. Only us, the *bnei Torah* who know the secret that there is a Day of Judgement, can make the required preparations to greet Judgement. The days of Elul themselves are considered to be שוטרים, and without this fear and awakening, we may, *chas v'chalilah*, arrive at the *Yom HaDin* lacking any sort of fear or apprehension. We should hopefully be able to enter these days of penitence primed with a plan to prepare and ready to repent in this time of reckoning.