

Shoftim: Keeping it Simple

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Simplicity is one of life's great arts. As we strive for higher accomplishments and as our lives and relationships become more complex, we often abandon the ordinary and the commonplace, exchanging simple ideas and simple values for style and for sophistication.

In his final monologue Moshe was sensitive to this tendency. Cautioning us about our pending encounter with a barbaric culture in Israel, he encouraged us to keep our religious experience simple. He urged us to be 'tamim', which loosely translates as the word "simple".

In this specific context, Moshe's plea for simplicity was designed to protect us from the voodooism of the local inhabitants. The ancient world was violent, unpredictable, and frightening. Prior to the advent of science and reason, humanity couldn't decipher their world, nor could they predict its inner workings. Enveloped with fear and anxiety they fashioned convoluted systems, attempting to divine and control the future. They practiced witchcraft, necromancy, black magic, soothsaying, and sorcery. Seeking to distance us from this debased underworld, Moshe cautioned us that, as a people of Hashem and of dignity, we had no place in this dark world of death and blood rituals. He urged us to keep our faith simple and strong, without fear of the future and without the need for bizarre ceremonies designed to predict that future.

Though stated in a very specific context, the value of 'tamim' or simplicity, has much broader application.

Simple Faith

The more we investigate and study the roots of religion the more our faith matures and the more our religious experience becomes profound. However philosophical inquiry about religion will always come up short and will, inevitably, reach an intellectual dead end. We cannot fully understand Hashem, nor can we fully comprehend His ways. Rational inquiry will never yield a comprehensive set of answers to the great mystery of Hashem or to the sweeping questions of religion. Religion is an article of faith, a product of received truths and of a courageous leap into the great unknown.

Philosophical inquiry is helpful only when it is predicated upon unshakable and simple faith. In his book entitled *Plato and Augustine*, Karl Jaspers, the 20th century philosopher, wrote "thinking is a way to both confirm and elucidate what faith has already made a certainty." Religious belief based solely upon philosophical inquiry rarely endures. It collapses under the weight of a confusing and uncertain world.

A Man of Simple Faith

The book of Genesis chronicles pioneers who faced religious trials, which severely tested their faith in Hashem. Though Avraham and Yitzhak were each fiercely tested, Ya'akov faced a dizzying array of tests throughout a lifetime of struggle. He fled a murderous brother, only to fall into the clutches of a conniving father-in-law. He returned home to, once again, face his deadly brother, surviving that peril only to watch tensions between his children and the locals erupt into a bloody massacre. Toward the end of his life, his family was badly fractured by sibling rivalry, and his life concluded in an Egyptian exile with him wondering whether he would ever be buried in Israel.

At each juncture he could have easily questioned his faith or wondered about the divine hand in his misfortunes. Yet, his faith survived precisely because it was built solidly upon simple and ordinary belief. At a young age he was already portrayed as a resident of tents and as a "tam", or a person of simple belief. Ultimately, his life became very complicated, and the religious tests he faced were anything but simple, but he withstood these conditions because of inner strength built upon simple and unadorned faith.

Simple Morality

Keeping things simple also provides moral clarity. Much of modern thought, influenced by authors such as Dostoevsky and Orwell, views Man as inherently evil and sinful. Left to their own devices and their own natural instincts, humanity will degenerate into violence and chaos.

Judaism flatly rejects this this pessimistic view of Man, arguing instead, that Man was created by Hashem, pure and upright. Though we possess innate moral instincts, our convoluted world strips us of our native purity and virtue. As Shlomo Hamelech comments in *Kohelet* (chapter 7) "Hashem made men plain, but they

have engaged in too much reasoning “. The search for higher moral reasoning or for complex ethical wisdom obfuscates the clarity of our moral instincts. In the pursuit of moral judgement, over-sophistication can confuse rather than clarify. Often, when facing moral dilemmas, we must trust our “gut” as to whether something feels right or wrong, without overthinking the “moral equation”. By looking inward to our own simple sense of right and wrong, rather than upward to a higher set of moral codes, we are better able to act with moral conviction.

Losing Simplicity

Our modern world has become extremely complex and sophisticated. To advance our world we were forced to create larger systems of human experience. We inhabit large cities, work in mammoth corporations, and live under the authority of outsized governments. Without these larger organizations human progress would stall, and modernity has greatly benefitted from these sophistications.

However, sophistication always comes at the price of simplicity, and we have surrendered simplicity for the sake of progress. The larger spaces we occupy are less personal and moving from one large and faceless system to another makes us feel lonely and alone. We are reduced to numbers, rather than names.

Additionally, all these larger “systems” require laws and regulations to assure their efficient and uniform operation. But rules and regulations create frustrating bureaucracies which often choke us. Bureaucracies are multi-layered systems and processes which oftentimes sink into dysfunction. Even when they function properly, they feel wasteful and irrelevant to our personal interests.

Finally, large systems also demand codes of conduct and conventions of behavior. In these larger systems we are forced to express ourselves in ways that aren’t completely natural. Our speech and behavior is influenced by the pervading culture of these larger systems such as cities or workplaces. Unable to freely and naturally express ourselves, we feel less authentic. It is no wonder that, amidst our ever-growing world of size and sophistication, we crave smaller frameworks and simpler conditions which allow more natural interactions and self-expression.

Heimish

There is a Jewish word which captures our yearning for a more simple and personalized experience. The word heimish, which is Yiddish for “homey”, distills our longing for the simple values and the common practices of the home.

Drowning in an enormous world of sophistication we yearn for the straightforward everyday interactions of family and community. We crave a familiar world in which we can just be ourselves.

In religious circles this word is often employed to preserve traditional values against a threatening outside world with its powerful cultural influences. Understandably, the phrase “heimish” was, initially, very popular in Chassidic circles which are highly suspicious of the outside world and, in response, fashion highly insular societies.

Gradually, this phrase has spread to many other Jewish communities and its growing popularity reflects our general societal longing for something simpler and more authentically Jewish. Or, something more “poshete” which is the actual Yiddish word for simple.

In our attempt to preserve our simplicity, it is foolishly simplistic to reject any sophistication. As with almost everything in life, success lies in the balancing. Balancing the benefits of our sophisticated world with the simple values of life, which are often overlooked in our big and fast world. Likewise, as our religious identity matures through learning and experience, we mustn't neglect the importance of simple values and simple truths lived elegantly, by simple people.

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