

JEWISH STUDY NETWORK

Shoftim

In this week's parsha we learn the proper procedure for dealing with troubling questions of halacha. The Torah acknowledges that at times, the skill of an individual rabbi or judge will not be up to the task of handling a difficult issue. If that should happen, the way forward is clear:

"If a matter of judgment is hidden from you, between blood and blood, between verdict and verdict, between plague and plague, matters of dispute in your cities -- you shall rise up and ascend to the place that Hashem, your God, shall choose. You shall come to the Kohanim, the Levites, and to the judge who will be in those days; you shall inquire and they will tell you the word of judgment. You shall do according to the word that they will tell you, from that place that Hashem will choose, and you shall be careful to do according to everything that they will teach you." (Devarim 17:8-10)

The simple reading of the text is entirely straightforward. When a question of Jewish law is too complex to be handled locally, it must be brought to Yerushalayim and presented to the highest rabbinic authorities. They will issue a final ruling on the topic, and it must be followed to the letter.

The Chasam Sofer (Rabbi Moshe Sofer, 1762-1839) presents a fascinating homiletical interpretation of the verses. He notes that just as on occasion illness or disorder may affect man's physical life, so too, the challenge of a difficult question may affect his spiritual and psychological life:



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continued ...

“On occasion, a wondrous and puzzling matter may come into the heart of man, whether in his [Torah] studies or in his contemplation of other knowledge. The wonderment, the doubt and confusion in his mind is an illness of the heart, and he certainly was not brought to this difficulty [for any reason] but that he might think more, and ponder and investigate with his intelligence until he achieves a correct understanding of the matter, and that he might reach a greater and deeper concept contained within this idea that he hitherto had not reached.”

The Chasam Sofer explains that encountering a serious difficulty in one’s studies is not to be viewed as an inconvenience, but as a gift. He draws upon the verses above to bolster his point. “If a matter of judgment is hidden from you”: the word the Torah uses for “judgment” is mishpat, which the Chasam Sofer translates into German as “justiz” -- justice. The student may encounter a matter which in his eyes is not “justice”, but misguided or unclear. It is then incumbent upon him to redouble his efforts, concentrating on the complex problem until he resolves it. The resultant focus and rigor should result in his rising to a new level in his intellectual achievements: “you shall rise up and ascend.”

SHABBAT SHALOM

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