## [Inner Light – TZADDIE צ and Parshat](https://www.torahofawakening.com/torah-of-awakening-teachings-408656/inner-light-tzaddie-and-parshat-shoftim) Shoftim

**The Greatness of Not Being So Great**

There’s a story about Rabbi Yaakov Yitzhak, the “Seer” of Lublin, that once he was confronted by his nemesis, Rabbi Azriel Hurwitz. Rabbi Hurwitz was the *Rav,* the chief rabbi of Lublin, and was known as the “Iron Head” because he was such a giant of Torah learning. He was often enraged by the Seer’s power to attract followers to himself.

“You yourself admit that you are not a *tzaddik* (perfected master); why do you continue to mislead the people by allowing them to come and follow you?” said the Iron Head.

“What can I do?” replied the Seer, “The people rejoice in my teachings, so they come.”

“This is what you must do,” said the Iron Head. “Next *Shabbos*, tell them that you are nothing special, that you don’t deserve their adoration.”

The Seer agreed.

Next *Shabbos*, when many *hassidim* came to hear the Seer teach, he told them that he was nothing special, and that they shouldn’t give him honors that he didn’t deserve. But, when they heard his self-deprecations, their hearts were set aflame even more, and they loved him and followed him even more for being so humble.

Later the next week, the Seer told the Iron Head what had happened. The *rav* thought for a moment, then said, “Ah, that’s the way it is with you *hassidim* – you love humility! Here is what you should do. Next *Shabbos,* tell them that you really are a great *tzaddik;* tell them that you are God’s chosen one, that you have come to save the Jewish people!”

“That I cannot do,” replied the Seer, “I am not a *tzaddik*, but neither am I a liar!”

Another time, the Iron Head was berating the Seer as usual for the crowds he attracted. “I am so much more learned than you, yet they don’t throng to me!”

“I too am astonished by this,” replied the Seer, “For my learning is not very great, and it is well known that your learning moves mountains. But perhaps the reason they come to me because I am astonished that they come to me, and the reason they don’t come to you is because you are astonished that they don’t come to you.”

The *tzaddik,* or spiritual master, is characterized by the quality of humility; this is the paradox of the *tzaddik,* that they do not think they are a *tzaddik.* This is represented by the position of the letter צ *tzaddie* on the Integral Tree (our version of the Tree of Life), connecting the sefirot of *Yesod* and *Hod.*

*Yesod*, which means “Foundation,” is life energy – the magnetic and charismatic joy of being – and hints that the tzaddik dedicates all their life energy and charisma to serving the Divine.

*Hod,* which means “Glory” or “Splendor,” is associated with the qualities of both humility and gratitude. This association stems from the word הודאה *hoda’ah,* which can mean confession, conceding an argument, and also grattitude, as in the morning prayer מידה אני *Modeh/Modah Ani,* which is chanted upon awakening to give thanks for being alive another day.

The life energy of joy and charisma (*Yesod*) is not typically paired with humility (*Hod*), which tends to be a personality trait of dampened joy and charisma. But the path of צ *tzaddie* shows that they can be joined in the persona of the *tzaddik* when life energy is dedicated to the Divine, to joyfully serving That which is beyond the self.

This supreme quality of צ *tzaddie* may seem far fetched, beyond reach for most people. And yet, it is not in any way something remote or separate from us; it is, in fact, the essence of who we are:

וְעַמֵּךְ֙ כֻּלָּ֣ם צַדִּיקִ֔ים לְעוֹלָ֖ם יִ֣ירְשׁוּ אָ֑רֶץ נֵ֧צֶר מַטָּעַ֛י מַעֲשֵׂ֥ה יָדַ֖י לְהִתְפָּאֵֽר׃

*And your people are all tzaddikim, forever they will possess the land; They are the branch of My planting, the work of My hands, in which I glory…*

- Isaiah 60:21

The context in this verse from Isaiah is that it is talking about the future, that all of us are potentially *tzaddikim* and that we will eventually evolve into being *tzaddikim.* But these words are also used as the introductory verse to each chapter of the wisdom text *Pirkei Avot,* as if to encourage the reader: don’t be disheartened! To be a *tzaddik* is our Essence; we need only to become transparent to our It. We cannot own It or possess It; we cannot try to claim it as an identity. Rather, it shines through when the ego bows to It.

But how do we do that?

**Parshat Shoftim**

שֹׁפְטִ֣ים וְשֹֽׁטְרִ֗ים תִּֽתֶּן־לְךָ֙ בְּכָל־שְׁעָרֶ֔יךָ אֲשֶׁ֨ר יְהוָ֧ה אֱלֹהֶ֛יךָ נֹתֵ֥ן לְךָ֖ לִשְׁבָטֶ֑יךָ וְשָׁפְט֥וּ אֶת־הָעָ֖ם מִשְׁפַּט־צֶֽדֶק׃

*Judges and officers you shall appoint for yourselves in all your gates– which Hashem your Divinity gives you– for your tribes, and they shall judge the people with justice.*

- *Devarim* (Deuteronomy) 16:18, *Parshat Shoftim*

In the plain meaning, this is the instruction to set up a just legal system. But on a deeper level, putting “judges and officers” in your “gates” means first of all to see your thoughts clearly and to know that they are only thoughts. Ordinarily, we tend to be wrapped up in constant thinking, never stopping to reflect: “Ah, there is a thought… and there is another thought.”

But when we simply acknowledge the fact that thoughts are just thoughts, there can arise the realization that we are not merely our thoughts; we are not bound by our ego-self, which is based on thought. This seeing and acknowledging of thought is represented by the שֹׁפְטִים *shoftim* – the “judges.”

Once we recognize that thoughts are only thoughts, that they are not the essence of who we are, we can then choose which thoughts to think and which thoughts to allow to dissipate. It is appropriate that the rav in the story was called the Iron Head, because he was so rich in knowledge – he had greatly cultivated his thinking mind – but his thoughts were like iron; he was locked in the prison of his mind. He was completely stuck in ego – that is, he was stuck in that sense of self created from thought. If he had a bit of objectivity on his own mind, he would have realized that his thoughts of being threatened by the Seer and his urge to attack him and knock him down were not useful thoughts; they only served to keep him trapped. He would have said, “Oh well, that’s the old ego” (*yetzer hara*) and simply let those thoughts go.

This second step, that of choosing to use our minds rather than be used by our minds, is represented by the שֹֽׁטְרִ֗ים – *shotrim,* the “officers.” Once we have a clear, objective view on our own minds (*shoftim*), we then have the power to choose which thoughts are worth keeping and which ones are not (*shotrim*). This leads us to the famous verse:

צֶ֥דֶק צֶ֖דֶק תִּרְדֹּ֑ף לְמַ֤עַן תִּֽחְיֶה֙ וְיָרַשְׁתָּ֣ אֶת־הָאָ֔רֶץ אֲשֶׁר יְיְ אֱלֹהֶ֖יךָ נֹתֵ֥ן לָֽךְ׃

*Justice, justice shall you pursue, that you may live and possess the land that the Hashem your Divinity gives you…*

- 16:20

צֶדֶק צֶדֶק – *Tzedek tzedek* – “justice” is written twice, to hint: this is not only the execution of justice in the world; we must also work to see the world in a way that is un-biased. We must “judge the judge,” so to speak, by knowing that thought is just thought, and then consciousy choosing which thoughts to think. To do this, we must know the dimension of our own being that is beyond ego, the dimension of simple awareness, so that we can drop our attachment to thought and thereby let go of our need for validation, for praise and for status – then the tzaddik nature can shine through quite naturally.

**There Goes the Neighborhood**

One time, I stepped out onto the front porch just before the sun set to daven Minkha – the afternoon prayers. It was such a beautiful evening- rays of pink and orange from the descending sun flickered through dancing leaves in the cool breeze of our Oakland neighborhood.

I began to sing the words with eyes closed-

“Ashrei yoshvei veitekha- Joyful are those who dwell in your house…”

Suddenly, I was startled by a harsh female voice calling to me: “Excuse me, are you meditating and praying?”

“Yes,” I answered politely. I opened my eyes to see a woman standing on the sidewalk right in front of me. She over-smiled mockingly and grotesquely, then dropped the smile, revealing a sinister and angry face.

“You are engaging in r-r-r-repetitive prayers?” she spurted with a theatrically rolled “R.” She thrust her neck at me and circled her head with her fingers, as if to mock the kippa I was wearing.

“Do you live on this street?” I asked her.

“You mean do I live in a house?” she yelled at me, “Because I see you certainly live in a house! You sit there in your house with your nonsensical prayers, asking me where I live??”

She continued up the sidewalk in a rampage – “Look at this guy in his house! Saying his prayers and meditating!” she screamed and yelled as she continued up the street… then she was gone.

When you hear this story, what is your impression?

I imagine people will hear this story in different ways. Some will be shocked at the woman’s behavior, while others will be moved by the problem of homelessness, and others will wonder what I did next.

The human mind understands what happens in terms of its own narratives. These narratives are not even necessarily conscious; they are mostly in the background and taken for granted as truth.

For example, what if this same scenario unfolded, except that the characters were actors in a play?

Imagine you were an actor. You played the guy on the porch, and your friend played the woman. When the play was over, there would be no emotional residue. After all, the play wasn’t real – you and your friend were just acting, so there would be no lingering emotional charge.

But when someone comes and assaults you verbally for real in the course of your day, what experience might arise then?

For most of us, there would be a sense of being threatened. There may be anger, an urge to retaliate, to defend, and so on. Probably, the first reaction would not be compassion.

My immediate reaction was certainly not compassion, even though that woman was probably mentally ill. Even though I am incredibly privileged – not just with a house, not just with friends and family who would help me if I were to lose my house, but with a mind that is, for the most part, sane and capable. She seemed not to be privileged in that way.

But, even if you, like me, may not feel compassion in the moment when someone is verbally attacking you, you still can be committed to compassion; this is the path of צ tzaddie – knowing that the tzaddik nature is there within you, even if it is not your immediate experience in the moment. The content of our experience constantly changes, but behind that change is awareness, and within that awareness is the potential of צ tzaddie, the potential to embody our Divine nature.

שֹׁפְטִ֣ים וְשֹֽׁטְרִ֗ים תִּֽתֶּן־לְךָ֙ בְּכָל־שְׁעָרֶ֔יךָ

*Shoftim v’shotrim titein l’kha b’khol sh’arekha – Judges and officers you shall appoint for yourselves in all your gates...*

The mind has its automatic judgments, but this verse is telling us to intentionally “appoint judges in your gates” – meaning, be aware of your preconceptions, your patterns, and don’t be limited by them; remember That to which you are devoted. Then, you can consciously choose how to frame your experience in your thoughts, and consequently choose how to act as well; these are the “officers.”

**Fearless**

Still, our reactive impulses can be incredibly powerful and seductive; it is crucial to not be afraid of our experience, to know that we are bigger than any particular impulse:

שְׁמַ֣ע יִשְׂרָאֵ֔ל אַתֶּ֨ם קְרֵבִ֥ים הַיּ֛וֹם לַמִּלְחָמָ֖ה עַל־אֹיְבֵיכֶ֑ם אַל־יֵרַ֣ךְ לְבַבְכֶ֗ם אַל־תִּֽירְא֧וּ וְאַֽל־תַּחְפְּז֛וּ וְאַל־תַּֽעַרְצ֖וּ מִפְּנֵיהֶֽם׃

*Hear, O Israel! You are near, today, to battle against your enemies. Don’t let your heart be distant; don’t be afraid, don’t panic, and don’t be broken before them...*

- 20:3

שְׁמַ֣ע יִשְׂרָאֵ֔ל

*Sh’ma – listen/become aware, Israel!*

This verse begins just like the other, better known verse – *Sh’ma Yisrael* – listen – be aware, Israel! When we bring our awareness into connection with our actual experience in the present moment, there can be a dropping of our ordinary preoccupation with thought and emotion, and the spacious quality of awareness itself appears...

אַתֶּ֨ם קְרֵבִ֥ים הַיּ֛וֹם

*You are close, today...*

This word for “close,” *k’reivim,* can mean “near,” “intimate.” *Hayom* – “today” – of course means Now. It is saying: become present – come close to this moment…

לַמִּלְחָמָ֖ה עַל־אֹיְבֵיכֶ֑ם

*To battle against your enemies…*

When we experience emotional pain, the tendency is to recoil, to contract, to project blame upon something we imagine to be the source of our pain. The imagined source – a person, a situation, whatever – seems to be our enemy, and we unconsciously oppose it. But here it reminds us, come close to that urge to battle against your enemies. Notice this unconscious impulse; be the awareness behind the impulse.

אַל־יֵרַ֣ךְ לְבַבְכֶ֗ם

*Don’t let your heart falter…*

The word for “falter” – *yeirakh* – is similar to the word for “hip” – the place where Jacob was struck by the Divine being, after which he limped – hence the connection with “falter.” But the hip is also a euphemism for the reproductive organs, the part of the body that is usually hidden. So, al yeirakh levavkhem can mean, “don’t hide your heart.” Together, it means: don’t cripple your heart by contracting! Don’t split yourself in two – whatever disturbing experience arises is literally made out of your own awareness – be present to it and don’t be ruled by it:

אַל־תִּֽירְא֧וּ וְאַֽל־תַּחְפְּז֛וּ

*Don’t be afraid, and don’t panic!*

Don’t fear your own fear – bring your awareness into the fear. Relax and don’t panic – don’t buy into the drama, simply feel whatever is there to be felt.

וְאַל־תַּֽעַרְצ֖וּ מִפְּנֵיהֶֽם

*And don’t be broken before them!*

This sums up the entire teaching: don’t divide yourself by imagining there is something in your experience that is separate from you; everything you perceive arises in your own awareness. Furthermore, this awareness that you are is actually far beyond “you” – it is Reality Itself, incarnating and becoming conscious as you; it is the Divine, seeing through your eyes.

This is hinted by the construction of each of these phrases: ***al*** *yeirakh,* ***al*** *tir’u,* ***al*** *takh’p’zu, v’****al*** *ta’artzu – Don’t let your heart be distant; don’t be afraid, don’t panic, and don’t be broken before them –* ***don’t don’t don’t don’t!***

The word for “don’t” – אַל *al* – also can mean both “to” (אל *el*) and “God” (*El*). The hint is that when we dissolve our fear by bringing our awareness **to** (אל *el*) the fear, that awareness is actually **God**’s awareness (*El*); the Divine is ever-present as our own consciousness! When strong emotions threaten to pull us into smallness, into contractedness, our deliberate *Presence With* the emotions actually harnesses their energy for deeper awakening from their drama. As it says in Psalm 27, which is traditionally recited at this time of year:

יְיְ אוֹרִ֣י וְ֭יִשְׁעִי מִמִּ֣י אִירָ֑א

*The Divine is my Light and my Salvation, who shall I fear?*

(Psalm 27:1)

This is path of צ *tzaddie* – bringing forth the *tzaddik* nature from within ourselves through the power of Presence...