**[Humility – Parshat Shoftim](https://www.torahofawakening.com/torah-of-awakening-teachings-408656/humility-parshat-shoftim)**

There’s a story about Rabbi Yaakov Yitzhak, the “Seer” of Lublin, that once he was confronted by his nemesis, the head rabbi of Lublin, Rabbi Azriel Hurwitz. Rabbi Hurwitz was known as the “Iron Head” because he was such a giant of Torah learning, and he often challenged and taunted the Seer for attracting followers to himself.

“You yourself admit that you are not a *tzadik* (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 *hasidim* 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 *hasidim –* you love humility! Here is what you should do. Next *Shabbos*, tell them that you really *are* a great *tzadik;* 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 *tzadik,* 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 then 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 *sefirah* of *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 thankfulness, as in the morning prayer מידה אני *Modeh Ani,* which is chanted upon awakening to give thanks for being alive another day.

The plain meaning of “glory” and the association with humility and gratitude may seem strange, but the connection is illustrated beautifully by the story of the Seer: It is through his embodiment of true humility that others can connect with the Divine “Glory” of his presence and teaching.

That’s because this supreme quality of *Hod* isn’t something remote or separate from us; it is the essence of who we are. But for *Hod* to shine through, we must be transparent to It; we cannot try to claim It, own It, or possess It. It shines through when the ego bows to It.

But how do we do that?

There is a hint in the *parshah:*

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.*

-       Deuteronomy 16:18

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 (or *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־יְהוָ֥ה אֱלֹהֶ֖יךָ נֹתֵ֥ן לָֽךְ׃

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

-       Deuteronomy 16:20

צֶ֥דֶק צֶ֖דֶק – *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 find the dimension of our own being that is beyond ego. And in this letting go of the need for validation, for praise and for status, the inherent “glory” of *Hod,* which shines from our essence, can be revealed and expressed in the fulness of our lives…

***More on Shoftim...***

[**Wholly Battle – Parshat Shoftim**](https://www.torahofawakening.com/torah-of-awakening-teachings-408656/wholly-battle-parshat-shoftim)9/3/2019  [0 Comments](https://www.torahofawakening.com/torah-of-awakening-teachings-408656/wholly-battle-parshat-shoftim%22%20%5Cl%20%22comments)

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.*
(Deuteronomy 20:3)

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.

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

This verse begins like the other, better known verse – *Sh’ma Yisrael – listen – be aware, Israel!*

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 aware – 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 the awareness of Reality Itself, incarnating as you; it is the Divine, seeing through your eyes.

This is hinted at by the construction of each of these phrases: ***al****yeirakh,****al****tir’u,****al****takh’p’zu, v’****al****ta’artzu – don’t don’t don’t!*

The word for “don’t” – *al –*also means both “to” *(el)* and “God” *(El).* The hint is that when we dissolve our fear by bringing our awareness *to (el)*the fear, *that awareness is actually God’s awareness (El).*The Divine Light 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.

יְהוָ֤ה ׀ אוֹרִ֣י וְ֭יִשְׁעִי מִמִּ֣י אִירָ֑א
*The Divine is my Light and my Salvation, who shall I fear?*
(Psalm 27:1)

[**Across the River – Parshat Shoftim**](https://www.torahofawakening.com/weekly-torah/across-the-river-parshat-shoftim)
8/14/2018  [0 Comments](https://www.torahofawakening.com/weekly-torah/across-the-river-parshat-shoftim#comments)

Once there was a rabbi who decided to start a *yeshivah,* a school for Jewish learning. He wanted it to be refuge from the world where young men could grow spiritually, so he built it away from civilization, on the bank of a beautiful river.

Many people came to learn. But after a few months, he noticed some commotion on the other side of the river. Many cars were coming and going, and people seemed to be partying and having a good time.

When he investigated, he found that that a courtesan had opened a bar and brothel. Lots of rich men came in big cars and carried on all night. He started thinking to himself, “Oy! That’s just what I need! My boys will be tempted away!”

Then he became angry: “Why is she wasting her life like that, and leading so many people to sin? She really shouldn’t be doing that!”

Meanwhile, it happened that the courtesan looked across the river and saw the little*yeshivah.* “I don’t know why I’m leading such a dirty life like this. Look at those holy people! They must be so happy and spiritual, so connected to the Divine, I wish I could be like that!”

The two of them contemplated like this for many months, each fixating on the other, when one day they suddenly both died. Angels came to accompany the spirit of the woman to paradise. But a hoard of ugly demonic spirits came for the *rav.*

“Hey, what going on? You must have gotten your addresses mixed up!”

“No mistake,” replied the demons, “We’ve come to take you to *she’ol.”*

“But what have I done wrong? I sit and learn and pray and fast and meditate all day, and help these boys to do the same!” he argued*.*

“Yes,” said the demons, “you do all the right things physically, but in your mind, you’ve been doing nothing but contemplating how ugly, unholy a life that woman is living, and so that’s the future you have created for yourself– we have come to the right place!”

To live an awakened life doesn’t mean to merely do external practices. It means: totally accept what comes to you with love, even and especially when it’s not what you want, but then also you must actively create what you do want, and you do that first of all on the level of thought. In *Pirkei Avot* 2:1, *Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi* says:

 אֵיזוֹ הִי דֶרֶךְ יְשָׁרָה שֶׁיָּבֹר לוֹ הָאָדָם, כֹּל שֶׁהִיא תִפְאֶרֶת לְעוֹשֶׂיהָ וְתִפְאֶרֶת לוֹ מִן הָאָדָם

*What is the straight path a person should choose for oneself?
​Kol shehi tiferet l’oseha – everything that is good to do for oneself, v’tiferet lo min ha’adam – and that will be appreciated by others.”*

In other words, take responsibility to create the life you want, and share that goodness with others.

But so often, we unconsciously do just the opposite– we begrudge what comes to us, blaming others or blaming the world for our perceived misfortune, and then we don’t take the steps we can take to create something better. And, we can often do this without even knowing it, if we’re not aware of our own minds. Like the story, we can seem to be doing the right thing externally, but in our minds, we can be creating the opposite. This week’s reading begins:

שֹׁפְטִ֣ים וְשֹֽׁטְרִ֗ים תִּֽתֶּן־לְךָ֙ בְּכָל־שְׁעָרֶ֔יךָ

*Shoftim v’shotrin titein l’kha b’khol sh’arekha –*
*Judges and officers you shall place in all your gates…*

How do you guard the gates of your own mind, so that negativity doesn’t sprout and create a personal hell?

שִׁוִּ֬יתִי יְהוָ֣ה לְנֶגְדִּ֣י תָמִ֑יד

*Sh’viti Hashem l’negdi tamid*
*I keep the Divine Name before me constantly…*

Keep your mind vibrating with a sacred phrase, such as *Atah Hu – You are the Divine,*knowing that everything arising in your experience are all forms of the One Reality. Like the woman in the story, see the Divine everywhere, focus on the Divine in everything. Then the Divine will be your refuge from all potential danger that can sprout from your thoughts. As the psalm says:

אַתָּ֤ה ׀ סֵ֥תֶר לִי֮ מִצַּ֪ר תִּ֫צְּרֵ֥נִי רָנֵּ֥י פַלֵּ֑ט תְּסֹ֖ובְבֵ֣נִי סֶֽלָה

*Atah seiter li, mitzar tizreini, ranei faleit t’soveveini, selah!*
*You are a shelter for me, from constriction you rescue me, with glad song of rescue you envelop me, selah!*
***​***
**​**[**Two Steps to Actualization: Parshat Shoftim**](https://www.torahofawakening.com/weekly-torah/two-steps-to-actualization-parshat-shoftim)
8/24/2017  [1 Comment](https://www.torahofawakening.com/weekly-torah/two-steps-to-actualization-parshat-shoftim%22%20%5Cl%20%22comments)

*Parshat Shoftim* begins, *Shoftim v’shotrim titein l’kha b’khol sh’arekha- judges and officers you shall place in your gates.* So, what are *shoftim,* the judges? They’re the ones who are supposed to discern the truth of something and then make a decision based on that truth. And what are *shotrim,* the officers? They’re the ones that inforce the decisions of the *shoftim.* These two functions in society also represent two functions on the spiritual path as well.

The job of the mind is to help us navigate through time and make decisions. For this reason, the mind is constantly judging everything, preferring this over that, pronouncing things as bad and good and so on. Of course, this is necessary, but the side effect is that you can become entirely focused on the incompleteness of everything, and that creates tension and stress. And, the more you experience the incompleteness of things, the more you experience yourself as incomplete, as never quite adequate, because on the level of form, that’s correct. Nothing is ever complete; everything is in motion, everything is needing other things to get temporary completion. Just like when you eat, you feel full, but sooner or later you have to eat again.

But as a *shofet,* as a judge on the spiritual level, you have to "judge the judge" in a sense. You have to see clearly how your mind works; how it automatically fixates on the incompleteness through its constant judging and thinking, and how that creates a sense of “me,” a sense of ego that is also incomplete and needy. Then, as the *shofet,* as the awareness that sees this, don’t get drawn into it. Don’t get seduced by it. Instead, accept this moment as it is, without preferring that were different, without “rathering” something else. As it says, *lo takir panim – don’t give preference to someone – v’lo tikakh shokhad – don’t take a bribe.* Meaning, don’t get sucked into the judgments of your mind that have an ego-enhancing motive. This stepping back from your own judging creates a kind of space between you and your mind, so that you can feel yourself not as the inadequate “me,” not as the ego, but as the space of awareness within which everything is perceived, including the feelings of the ego. That’s the first step – *shoftim –* transcending the mind through awareness of the mind.

The next step is the *shotrim,* the officers. Because no matter how deep your transcendence is, it won’t necessarily make its way into your behavior unless you deliberately choose to turn away from your old negative patterns and create new positive ones. That’s why a few lines later it says, *Tzedek tzedek tirdof l’ma’an tikhyeh- Fairness, or justice, you shall pursue, so that you may live.

​*It says *tzedek –* meaning justice or fairness – twice, because the first *tzedek* is that you have to be impartial with regard to everything arising in your experience, accepting everything as it is, and then the second *tzedek* is to look closely at your behavioral patterns and choose actions that embody *tzedek,* actions that are *tzeddaka,* that are in the spirit of love, healing, and *tikun olam-* improving on the world of form, rather than doing things that create or reinforce conflict and suffering.

So, on this *Shabbat Shoftim,* the Sabbath of Judges, which is the first Shabbat of *Elul,* the month of preparation for the *Yamim Noraim,* the High and Holy days of up-leveling our relationship with life, may we all refocus our efforts on both of these crucial aspects of the Path – realizing and embodying, realizing and embodying, and may our suffering world please come closer to healing and transformation as well. Good Shabbos!

[**There Goes the Neighborhood- Parshat Shoftim**](https://www.torahofawakening.com/weekly-torah/there-goes-the-neighborhood-parshat-shoftim)
9/7/2016

One time, I stepped out onto the front porch just before the sun set to *daven Minkha-* the collection of 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’s 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 curiosity,  openness, or the desire to discover the truth of the situation.

My immediate reaction was certainly not curiosity, 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 may not feel concerned with truth in the moment when someone is verbally attacking you, *you still can be committed to truth.*

And this is the crucial thing: not what you happen to feel in any given moment, not what you happen to think in any given moment, but rather what you choose to be committed to, regardless of the momentary, passing content of your experience. The content of your experience constantly changes, but behind all that change is you- and you can choose.

This week’s reading begins:

*“Shoftim v’shotrim titein l’kha b’khol sh’arekha-*

*“Judges and officers you should place in your gates, that your Divine nature, Existence Itself, is giving you, and they will judge the people with fairness.”*

The mind has its automatic judgments, but this verse is telling us to intentionally “place the judge in your gate”- meaning, be aware of your preconceptions, your patterns, and don’t be fooled by them. See what’s really happening. Don't over-interpret, and admit what you don’t know.

Your behaviors will have their automatic patterns as well, so you also need to have “officers”- concrete practices to help you *remember* to be aware of the truth of your experience, and not be seduced into embellishments and assumptions.

Without these two things- a commitment to truth that you can verbalize and practices you can actualize- your highest awareness will be fleeting, blowing about in the winds of whatever happens to happen. And, the threat is not just from the unpleasant things that happen. Just as unpleasant things can derail you from seeing clearly, so also “good” things can cause complacency and laziness. Seeing truth requires vigilance against all of your own biases; that’s being awake.

And when you’re really awake, not to clinging to preconceptions and judgments, the realization can dawn on you- that actually, we don’t know very much. All we really know is what we are witnessing, in this moment. In this freedom from preconception, Reality can be quite surprising:

A hasid by the name of Reb Yosef Moshe once visited his rebbe, Reb Yisrael- the Maggid of Koznitz- to get a blessing before embarking on a journey.

The Maggid blessed his journey, but added: “Tell me- what do you do when your carriage comes upon a poor man who is going in your direction on foot and asks to be given a ride?”

“Why, that happens a lot,” replied Reb Yosef. “My men have instructions to stop for poor wayfarers, and take them to their destination.”

“And suppose you came upon a pauper who seemed to have trouble walking, leaning on a stick- what happens then?” asked the rebbe.

“I would say that it’s even more important to take in such a person,” said the hasid.

“I would say the exact opposite!” retorted the Maggid. “A healthy person depends on their legs. If a carriage comes by, so much the better; if not, one can continue on foot.

“But if a person needs a cane to walk, how can they undertake a long journey and rely on the miracle of a carriage to appear at the right moment and take them where they need to go? I would say that such a person is a fraud, and who knows what their true motives are?”

The hasid was of course surprised to hear these words. Why would the rebbe say that?

He set out the next day on his journey. In the course of the carriage ride, he lay down and fell asleep. While he was asleep, his companions saw a pauper who was limping along on crutches. The pauper waved his arms and begged them to stop and take him with them, so they called to the coachmen to draw the reign and wait until he caught up with them. Reb Yosef, awakened by the sound of their shouting, asked why they had stopped.

“There’s a man with crutches, so we stopped to give him a ride,” they replied.

As soon as he heard this, he remembered his rebbe’s words and cried out to the coachmen- “Quick! Gallop ahead as fast as you can!”

The coachman cracked his whip and off went the carriage at top speed. The “pauper” then lifted both crutches and started running after them! Unable to catch up, he hurled one of his crutches at them in anger. Fortunately, no one was hurt.

On this *Shabbat Shoftim-* the Sabbath of Judges- may we remember to place our discerning wisdom at the gates of our senses, being careful to note exactly what we perceive, without the bias of our preconceptions, and may our true seeing be in service of everyone equally, as it says-

*“Tzedek tzedek tirdof- Justice, justice you shall pursue…”*