

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny Freedman

(Portion of Devarim)

How did it come to this?

How could it be that a Former Israeli Chief Rabbi had been indicted for taking millions in bribes, and faces trial for numerous counts of bribery fraud and money laundering?

I am not commenting on the case itself, nor am I offering any opinion as to the guilt or innocence of the former Chief Rabbi, as my information comes only from the media¹ which is not a court of law. But if a Chief Rabbi can be put on trial for bribery and fraud, something is obviously dreadfully wrong. If a Chief Rabbi can become corrupted, how can we avoid the same pitfalls? Is there a recipe for remaining true to one's ethical principles?

This Shabbat we begin reading the fifth and final book of the Five Books of Moses, *Sefer Devarim*

(Deuteronomy). In this book Moshe gives his farewell soliloquy to the Jewish people as the first verse suggests:

"These are the words that Moshe spoke to the children of Israel on the banks of the Jordan..." (Devarim ; (Deuteronomy) 1:1)

Yet, it takes 16 verses for Moshe to recount some of the Jewish people's journeys, before getting to what seems to be the actual beginning of his message

"And I commanded your judges ... judge righteously between man and his fellow ..." (Devarim 1:16)

This is one of the major themes of the book of Devarim: to do Justice; and it is a theme which resonates throughout the book, not to mention within this week's portion, which speaks of not being partial in judgment, not to fear man, but be upright before G-d, and so on....

But how do we stay true to these principles?

There is a fascinating statement in the Talmud regarding life after death:

According to the Talmud (Rava, on Shabbat 31a), when we get to our final judgment the first question will be asked is: *"Nasata ve'natata' be'emunah?"* Literally: 'did you conduct your business in good faith?'

Were we honest? Did we do what deep down we knew what was right?

Now, don't get me wrong; obviously being honest and ethical in our business dealings is important. But ... seriously? This is the first question I will have to answer in 'the great beyond'? Not 'did you keep kosher?' not 'were you strictly Shabbat observant' and not even 'did you serve idols, commit adultery, or murder (character assassination?)', but rather: 'were you an honest businessman? Why is this the first concern at the end of our lives?

And this question is especially perplexing as one would have expected 'heaven' already knows the answer! Doesn't G-d know everything, everywhere, always? So why does Hashem (G-d) even have to ask?

Obviously this Talmudic statement is not part of a Talmudic trivia list for when we die; it is rather a message we are meant to live by, now, and a question we need to ask ourselves, every day.

Are we doing what is right? And how do we know what is right in the first place?

What happens when someone thinks what is right is really wrong, and what is wrong is really right?

Years ago, there was a study commissioned by a major hotel chain in America using data from five luxury hotels. It

¹ In 2017, the Former Israeli Chief Rabbi confessed to a slew of corruption charges in exchange for a reduced 3-and-a-half-year sentence and released after 22 months on good behavior.

seems (at least at the time of the study in the late 70's) nearly half of the hotel guests on average were stealing something from their hotel rooms, and the hotel chain, as a way of creating a preventative process, wanted to find out why. Recall that these were guests staying in luxury hotels who could more than afford to buy their own towels, robes, or alarm clocks, so why were they stealing? Very few of the guests simply

responded with anything akin to 'we could not resist'; most had responses which actually justified stealing under the circumstances was perfectly OK! Some suggested they were paying marked up hotel prices precisely because so many guests steal, so they had essentially paid for their pilfered items!

But what actually makes such a person wrong? After all, if I think something is right, why is it not right? Deists have a simple solution to this problem; those of us who believe in G-d believe it is G-d who decides something is right or wrong, not man. But what if someone does not accept the premise of a Divine?

Some suggest that we have a social contract dictated by society that determines right and wrong. But what if an entire society, or even an entire world, decides that what is right is wrong, and what is wrong is right? Does anyone really believe that if Hitler had conquered the world it would have been 'right' to round up all the Jews and Gypsies and throw them into gas chambers? Is it 'right' in Iran to murder innocent people simply because they are Jews, Israelis, or Westerners?

As Bertrand Russell (a self-proclaimed Atheist) once said "to believe that the only thing wrong with cruelty is that I don't like it, is to believe the absurd ..."

There can only be an objective ethic if there is an objective source of ethics. Hence as long as human beings are determining ethics, they can never be objective, and will inevitably lead to moral and ethical failure, and eventually to moral chaos.

Perhaps the Talmud's question: "*Nasata ve'natata' be'emunah?*" uses the word faith ('did you conduct business in good *faith*') with intention. It is only a faith-based ethic that can stand the test of time. Indeed, as Rav Kook suggests in his *Mimrakei Emunah* (pollutions of faith) whenever a person makes mistakes (*chataim*) it is always the result of a flawed relationship with G-d. If a person saw Hashem in front of him always, he could never take a bribe or steal funds from the unsuspecting. If a person clearly saw every human being as created in Hashem (G-d)'s image, he could never bring himself to purposely harm another human being.

It is not accidental that we *always* read this portion of Devarim and begin this last book of the Torah in the Shabbat before the Ninth of Av, the anniversary of the destruction of both Temples, and the source of our exile. Our Temple was not destroyed because we did not keep Kosher or even because of assimilation and intermarriage; the source of our exile was because we forgot what was right.

As we begin the book of Devarim we all need to consider how we have come to be living in a society where one's word is no longer one's bond, where so many of our leaders are corrupted and no longer mean what they say nor do what they should.

There is saying in Israel: '*Al tehiyeh tzodek, tehiyeh chacham...*' 'don't be right; be smart ...'

And while that may be true if someone is screaming at you at a traffic light, perhaps as a people, and as a world, we actually need to get back to being right.

We call ourselves the people of the book; which is the best-selling book of all time, because it was given to us by a pretty impressive author.

Perhaps it is time to get back to the recipe that made us who we are, all those thousands of years ago at Sinai.

Shabbat Shalom from Jerusalem

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