



RABBI SHALOM

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Lessons in Judgement

Parshat Shoftim opens with a directive to appoint Judges. The judges are warned not to favor one party over another (לא תכיר פנים), not to accept bribes (לא תקח שוחד), and to pursue justice (צדק צדק תרדוף).

After these opening pesukim regarding judgement, the following three pesukim appear:

לֹא־תִטֵּעַ לְךָ אֲשֶׁרָה כְּלֶֽעָיָ אֲצִל מִזְבַּח ה' אֱלֹקֶיךָ אֲשֶׁר תַּעֲשֶׂה לְךָ

*You shall not plant for yourself an **asherah**, [or] any tree, near the altar of the Lord, your God, which you shall make for yourself.*

וְלֹא־תִקֵּים לְךָ מִצְבֵּה אֲשֶׁר שָׂנֵא ה' אֱלֹקֶיךָ
*And you shall not set up for yourself a **monument**, which the Lord, your God hates.*

לֹא־תִזְבַּח לֵה' אֱלֹקֶיךָ שׁוֹר וְשֶׂה אֲשֶׁר יִהְיֶה בּוֹ מוּם כֹּל דָּבָר רָע כִּי תִזְבַּח ה' אֱלֹקֶיךָ הוּא

*You shall not sacrifice to the Lord, your God, an ox or a sheep that has in it a **blemish** or any bad thing, for that is an abomination to the Lord, your God.*

These three prohibitions are then followed by laws of witnesses (עדים), and a directive not to divert from the word of the Rabbis (לא תסור).

The Seforno questions the sequence of these commands. The Parsha opens with a directive to the judges, is “**interrupted**” with three halachot (not to plant an Ashera (tree) on Har Habayit; no to sacrifice on a matzeva; and not to sacrifice an animal with a blemish), and then returns to items connected to judgement (witnesses, and obeying Rabbis). Why are the three halachot of Ashera, Matzeva and Ba'al Mum, sandwiched between the two sections of directives about judgement?

The Seforno cleverly derives an important lesson from the placement of these three restrictions in between the two segments about judgement. Each of these three restrictions teaches us not to “judge a book by its cover”. This is applicable to judges and to every individual.

ASHERA - אשרה

One may conjecture that it would be appropriate to place trees on Har Habayit to beautify its landscape. The Torah is teaching us that although to one's eye trees may appear aesthetically pleasing, they are indeed spiritually blemished, as they are utilized in acts of avoda zara (idolatry). A judge may have an attractive outward appearance but not the proper qualifications. One should not be overly swayed by the exterior.

MATZEVA - מצבה

A matzeva is a monument or platform upon which one used to offer sacrifices.

One is now prohibited to offer sacrifices on a matzeva. An individual may speculate that offering a sacrifice to God is a positive act, no matter where it is performed. The Torah warns that this is not viewed favorably by Hashem. Another example of an act that may appear to be noble but that is spiritually flawed.

BA'AL MUM - בעל מום

One is prohibited from offering an animal with a blemish. It may be a strong and beautiful ox, but if it has even a tiny blemish (like in the Kamsa and Bar Kamsa story), one is prohibited from sacrificing the animal. A third example of how one's judgement should not be tainted solely by appearances. Even a tiny blemish can turn an exquisite cow into a spiritually undesired sacrifice.

Common Denominator – Judgement

The three halachot placed in between

the two sections dealing with judgement, do not interrupt the flow of this idea. Ashera, Matzeva and Ba'al Mum teach us not to **judge** others by appearance. This is applicable not just to judges but to all people. At times we may form an opinion of another based on a first impression or based on their appearance. It is crucial to look through the exterior and to be able to see the beauty within and the special qualities and characteristics of others. A wise man once said: Don't judge people by their covers, most of their books are still being written. ■

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