

Sermon *Shoftim*

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When the rabbi asked me on Tuesday afternoon if I would give this morning's sermon, and I agreed, I knew I would have to follow the KISS rule and Keep It Simple, Sweetheart. Little did I know that keeping it simple would become the sermon's theme as well.

This week's portion, *Shoftim*, or magistrates, is given over to the creation of courts of law. The people are to be governed with due justice; the judges are to be impartial and immune to bribery. There must be two witnesses testifying in criminal cases that they saw the accused commit the crime in question. *Shoftim* gives us the famous directive *Tzedek tzedek tirdof*, justice justice shalt thou pursue.

From establishing a magistrate, *Shoftim* shifts to the prohibition of consulting ghosts, or consorting with those who are inquirers of the dead. It was among these verses that I found the one simple sentence upon which I wanted to build today's sermon. *Tamim t'hiyeh im adonai elochcha*. *You shall be "tam" before the Lord your God*. But what does the Hebrew word *tam* actually mean? It's not so simple to translate this little word. At the Seder, the child who is *tam*, is known as the simple child. In English we usually understand this child to be simple minded, one who cannot grasp life's complexities as does his wise sibling; a simpleton who lacks the spark of the rebellious one. At least the

tam child is not as clueless as the one who has no label at all, but is known as the one who doesn't even know to ask.

In a chapter forbidding B'nai Israel to truck with ghost busters, fortune tellers and soothsayers, understanding the word *tam* is anything but simple. It can mean perfect. Blameless. Naive. Innocent. It also means wholehearted and that understanding of the word best sheds light on what God wants of us here in *Shoftim*. *You must be wholehearted with the Lord*. In other words, You cannot divine the future. You are forbidden even to try. You cannot reach out to the dead for counsel or guidance either. You must stay in the simplest, and most difficult place to be — the present. *Shoftim* instructs us that the only way to stay in the present is to be *tam*, wholehearted with God, to trust in God. To build a relationship with God in the here and now. Being wholehearted with God means to stay present in that relationship through joy and devastation. Through states of uncertainty and times of surety. The very act of engaging in that relationship with God is what will ground us in the present.

It is human nature to worry about the future, to preoccupy ourselves, drive ourselves to distraction with What ifs. We gnaw on past events like a dog with a bone — reliving past slights, cultivating anger, mentally arguing with someone who crossed us at some point in the past. We worry if this child will find the right job, if that child ever marry. We allow slights and bigger unkindnesses to fester like splinters in our heart. We tangle ourselves in the complexities of the past and the future although it is wiser, safer and healthier to remain in the present.

It sounds so simple. Be present. But it's not. Because to remain in the present means relinquishing the satisfying, though false, sense of control that worrying gives us. Letting go of past hurts demands that we face our pain and find a way to move past it. How are we to do this? *Shoftim* gives us the answer — by being wholehearted with God.

I am not saying that memory has no place in our lives. Or that we shouldn't plan for our future. Memory returns to us our loved ones who have died. Missteps that live in yesterday's memories, guide us to choose better paths today. Memory keeps alive the cherished younger self that hopped a midnight train in Paris and hitchhiked to Pamplona for the running of the bulls.

Nor can we ignore our future. We must plan; we must save. We constantly adjust our course, setting our sights on where we think we want to be all the while knowing that plans can be upended in a moment. *Mensch tracht und Gott Lacht*. Man Plans and God Laughs.

Years ago, my husband gave me a pillow.

The quote on it reads *I've had thousands of problems my life, most of which never happened*. Whenever I would start perseverating and worrying about something that had happened or that I was afraid would happen, he would tell me to get out my pillow. Because all the worrying and projecting took me out of my present life. All that worrying took me to useless places where nothing can be accomplished. We cannot remodel the

past. String theory and quantum physics aside, we can't predict the future or create it as if arranging furniture in a doll house.

Rabbi Naomi Hyman quotes Rashi who takes the word *tam* in this context to mean simple. Instead of unnecessarily complicating our lives by living in our heads, Rashi, Rabbi Hyman writes, seems to suggest that we should stay in contact with the truth of our lives. When we are simple in this way, we are deeply connected to, and engaged with Life, with Divinity itself.

And the truth of our lives is that the only place we can live them is in the present. This is what *Shoftim* is trying to teach us. The only place we can grow, the only place we can make amends, or effect change is in the present. This is why we need to be wholehearted with God. If we open our hearts to the possibility, to the hope and to the difficult truth that God is there, we can finally be whole. It's just that simple.