

This week's Torah portion, Parshat Shoftim, contains the section dealing with the appointment, installation and regulations of a Jewish monarchical system. Amongst the many directives for the king we are informed that the king must carry with him at all times his own personal, mini Sefer Torah. In explaining this unique accoutrement, the Torah says "And it shall be with him, and he shall read it all the days of his life; that he may learn to fear the LORD his God, to keep all the words of this law and these statutes, to do them; that his heart be not lifted up above his brethren, and that he turn not aside from the commandment, to the right hand, or to the left..." The Torah is imploring the King to keep his Torah close to him at all times so he can remain a G-D fearing person who does not become arrogant and haughty. Yet, the language of this mandate seems to be perplexing, why does it say that it is so "He does not turn aside from the commandment," are we only afraid that he might turn away from one commandment? Are we not afraid that he might turn away from Judaism in general? If there is only a fear that he might disengage from one commandment, which commandment is that?

The Talmud tells us that the great rabbinic sage, Hillel, was once approached by a would-be a convert and asked to be converted on the condition that Hillel teach the man the entire Torah while the man remained standing on one foot. Instead of shunning the man, like Shamai (a contemporary of Hillel), Hillel agreed to the proviso, and taught the man, "Don't do to your friend what you would not want done to yourself, the rest of the Torah is just commentary so go and learn it." This pithy motto is actually based on the more famous Biblical edict "Love thy neighbor as thyself." Echoing Hillel's thoughts about the centrality of this theme in Judaism, the Arizal used to preface all his prayers with following phrase "I hereby accept upon myself to love every Jew as I love myself." Only after he had achieved this elusive, yet, essential love for all his fellow Jews, would he then engage in Tefillah, prayer.

At the core of our faith is to love those around us. We cannot approach G-D in earnest supplication when there is anger and enmity in our hearts to our fellow Jews. In order to create a space for G-D in our lives, we first need to create a space for everyone else around us. It is doubtful that G-D would even want a space in the heart of a man filled with hate and aversion to his fellow human beings.

Upon entering the world of leadership (especially Jewish communal leadership), it can be quite a daunting task to continue to love each and every fellow Jew. Certainly a king who is pressured with global matters such as security, finance, and legislation, is very likely to forget that his most essential task is to be the unifier of the entire Jewish world, showering his people unconditional love. Yet, if he fails to do so, it would be his greatest failure as king, and our greatest undoing as a nation.

Shabbat Shalom,

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