



Partners In Torah

San Diego-Los Angeles-Ventura

Take home Dvar Torah

Parshat Shoftim תשפ"ד

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Hello, Welcome!

Partners In Torah is a community-wide, independent and inclusive adult education program focusing on understanding Jewish relevancy to our lives by studying text most interesting to each participant.

Through one-on-one discussion for 1 hour each week, friendships are forged between mentors and mentees.

Partners in Torah has proven to be effective at reclaiming the rich legacy of wisdom, inspiration, and guidance for many who have, until now, lacked access.

Thank you for joining us!

Please encourage friends to join you in participating so that we may grow together as a community.

If statistics are correct, Jews comprise .02% of the world's population: There are over 2.5 billion Christians, almost 2 billion Muslims, and billions more people in many other religions, including non-believers. Interestingly, the Torah instructs us to follow the majority in matters of Jewish law (and in this week's portion we learn about a זקן ממרא - *a rebellious elder* – a member of a Jewish court who rejects the majority opinion and is put to death for his rebellion). So, why don't the Jewish people follow the "majority" of the world and leave the Jewish religion altogether? Why doesn't "majority rule" in this most important matter?

The Czar once summoned a prominent Jew to appear in his chambers at a certain time. Although he was not given the instructions to the Czar's chambers, when he appeared on time, the Czar asked him, "How did you know how to get here?"

"I followed the crowd," answered the Jew.

"So, why don't you follow the crowd as far as your religion also?" asked the Czar.

He answered. "Your Highness, now that I know where your chambers are, even if the crowd was going in a different direction, I would still come straight here." In other words, "majority rules" applies only when one is in doubt about something. If he doesn't know, it makes sense to say, "Well, if most people are doing this, there must be something to it." But when one knows beyond a doubt that what he has is real and true and that everyone else is mistaken, there is no "crowd" to follow.

Imagine you are at a lecture with a thousand people in attendance. You are sitting in the back of the room near the table with

the refreshments, and, right in front of your eyes, a snake crawls up onto the table and sips from the punch bowl in the middle of the table, poisoning it. How many people would it take to convince you, having seen what you just saw, that the punch was okay to drink? They can say whatever they want, but you know the reality and will not give in, no matter what.

From the events in Egypt and from the Torah that Hashem has given them, the Jewish people have proof that Hashem has chosen them as His nation. Because we know that we have the truth, there is no need to follow the majority.

This week's portion contains a second answer to this question. The judges are instructed (Deuteronomy 16:19):

יט) לא תטה משפט לא תכיר פנים ולא תקח שחד כי השחד יעור עיני חכמים ויסלף דברי צדיקים

19) You shall not pervert the judgment, you shall not respect someone's presence, and you shall not accept a bribe, for the bribe will blind the eyes of the wise and make just words crooked.

A judge who accepts a bribe impairs his judgment, rendering him unable to judge the case fairly. This is not merely a possibility; it is a fact. Hashem is telling us in the Torah that this is how He made a person; a person is hard-wired to react this way to a bribe.

Rava in Tractate Kesubos (105b) explains the mechanism.

אמר רבא מאי טעמא דשוחדא? כיון דקביל ליה שוחדא מיניה, איקרבא ליה דעתיה לגביה והוי כגופיה; ואין אדם רואה חובה לעצמו. מאי שוחד? שהוא חד

Rava said: Why is a bribe forbidden? Once the judge has accepted a bribe from him, he feels close to him and he sees him as himself, and a person doesn't see his own flaws.

The Talmud relates the story of Rabbi Yishmael and his sharecropper. (A sharecropper works someone else's field and takes as his payment a percentage of the crops in lieu of a salary. This arrangement gives him incentive to generate a greater yield, since the more the field produces, the greater his share.)

ר' ישמעאל בר' יוסי הוה רגיל אריסיה דהוה מייתי ליה כל מעלי שבתא כנתא דפירי. יומא חד, אייתי ליה בה' בשבתא. אמר ליה, מאי שנא האידינא? אמר ליה, דינא אית לי ואמינא אגב אורחי אייתי ליה למר. לא קביל מיניה. אמר ליה, פסילנא לך לדינא אותיב זוזא דרבנן וקדיינין ליה בהדי דקאזיל ואתי אמר אי בעי טעין הכי ואי בעי טעין הכי אמר תיפח נפשם של מקבלי שוחד ומה אני שלא נטלתי ואם נטלתי שלי נטלתי כך מקבלי שוחד על אחת כמה וכמה

Rabbi Yishmael's sharecropper would bring him a basket of fruit from his field every Friday afternoon in honor of the Shabbat. One week, he brought it to Rabbi Yishmael on Thursday instead of Friday. Rabbi Yishmael asked him, "Why did you bring me my fruit on Thursday this week?"

The sharecropper answered, "I have a court case I need you to judge for me (the courts were open only on Thursday) and I thought that I would bring you your crops while I am at it."

Rabbi Yishmael refused to accept the basket of fruit and responded, "Now that you have done this, I must recuse myself from judging your case, but I will have some of my friends judge it for you." As Rabbi Yishmael watched the case being judged, he found himself saying to himself, "My sharecropper can claim this and win! He can say that and he'll win the case." When he realized what he was doing, he caught himself and said, "The judges who take bribes and claim that they can remain impartial should all jump in the lake! Look at me! I didn't even accept the fruit that he brought me, and even if I would

have accepted it, it was my own fruit - the fruit of my field, and I am still looking for his merit; can you imagine if it was a real bribe?!"

The Chofetz Chaim (Rabbi Yisroel Meir HaCohen Kagan 1832 - 1933) points out another important factor to consider.

If someone said, "So and so is very wealthy," in evaluating the person's wealth you would take into consideration who is telling you the information. If he was a pauper, what would it take, from his standpoint, to be wealthy? But if Bill Gates told you that someone is wealthy, you could know for sure that that person is wealthy because Bill Gates surely knows what it means to be wealthy.

The same idea is true of wisdom. When someone would say, "So and so is so wise!" you would first ask yourself, "How wise is this fellow, anyway? What does he know about wisdom?" In this case, Hashem, the source of all wisdom, says that bribery will corrupt a *wise* judge. But, if Hashem is calling the judge wise, he must really be wise! And still, a bribe will compromise his wisdom and falsify his judgment. A person is hard-wired this way, and there can be no other outcome. This is the way Hashem has made His world.

Maimonides lists the commandment to believe in Hashem as the very first mitzvah in the Torah.

Rabbi Elchonon Wasserman (1874-1941) in his book קובץ מאמרים asks, "How is it possible to command someone to believe in Hashem? Either he does or he doesn't! If he does, he doesn't need the commandment, and if he doesn't, what is the commandment going to help? What could he possibly do to get it?"

Rabbi Wasserman then asks two more questions.

- 1) A boy at the age of 13 and a girl at age 12 are obligated to believe in Hashem. How are they expected to fulfill a

commandment that is daunting even to some of the most intelligent adults? How does Hashem expect such young people to fulfill a mitzvah that the greatest scientists and philosophers stumble upon?

- 2) A gentile is obligated to keep the seven Laws of Noach. The first one is to believe in Hashem, the G-d of Israel. Without the Torah or proper education how could every gentile be expected to believe in Hashem?

The answer to all these questions is that belief in Hashem is both simple and intuitive. Any logical, thinking person must conclude from the complexity and design of the world around him that it was created by a most brilliant and ingenious Creator. An undeniable observation of the world reveals that chance events don't yield organized, coherent results. If ink spills on a clean sheet of paper, will it form letters that form words that make sense? Could a sane person look at a written page of words that tell a story and say that it happened by accident through an explosion in a printing press? Is it possible to look at the movement of a watch and say it happened randomly? There are an infinite number of examples in nature of the masterful creativity of the Creator from which the objective mind must conclude that there was a thoughtful mind behind it all.

The Midrash tells the story of an atheist who came to Rabbi Akiva and asked him, "Who created the world?"

Rabbi Akiva responded, "Hashem!"

"Prove it!" said the man.

Rabbi Akiva asked him. "Who made your garment?"

"A weaver." Responded the man.

“Prove it!” answered Rabbi Akiva.

He then turned to his students and said, “Just as a garment testifies to weaver, a door to a carpenter, and a house to a builder, so too, the world and everything in it testifies to Hashem who created it.”

So, if identifying Hashem is such a simple matter such that every child and person in the world is can easily see Him and believe in Him through His creation, how is it that this self-evident truth escapes even some of the greatest scientists and philosophers?

The answer is, says Rabbi Wasserman, that they are the victims of an enormous bribe and thus cannot see straight. What bribe have they accepted? The bribe to remain free of obligations and responsibility.

A man once asked Rabbi Noach Weinberg, ר"צ"ל - Rosh Yeshiva of Aish Hatorah in Jerusalem, to prove to him that there is a G-d. Rabbi Weinberg said, “I will be happy to prove it to you, but you must promise me one thing.” “What’s that?” asked the man. “That you won’t change one thing in your life if I prove it to you,” answered the rabbi. “That’s a funny request, rabbi, why would you say a thing like that?” asked the man. “If there’s G-d, and because of it you’re going to have to change your whole life around, do you think I’ll be able to prove it to you?”

There is strong incentive to deny G-d’s existence. If He exists, that means that He created me for a purpose, and I have a mission in this world. That means that I have responsibility and accountability. I can’t just do what I want to do. “Why would I want to believe that and change my whole life around? Many scientists say we don’t need G-d for the world to exist, and if I believe that, I can continue on with my happy-go-lucky life. I would much rather be free of the whole thing and

make life easier for myself.” This, my friends, is the greatest bribe in the world.

How do we overcome this bribe that is so tempting and powerful?

There is only one way. We must take stock of the world around us, and figure out once and for all, ***Is it possible, by any stretch of the imagination, that this incredible world with all that it comprises, most compelling of all - the human being, came about by chance?***

There is so much wisdom in nature. The bees know how to create a hexagonal hive - the most efficient configuration; the birds know how to build their nests; the beavers know how to make a dam; the ants know how to make an ant house, etc.

Every creature is endowed with the wisdom it needs to procure its sustenance. The spiders know how to weave a web to catch prey, the velvet worm knows how to produce the glue that it sprays at its prey in to immobilize it so he can eat it, the bombardier beetle knows how to mix hydrogen peroxide with hydroquinone which together reach 212 degrees in an instant, to spray on his pursuer, the bats use echolocation to target their prey, and the list goes on. Whence did they get this wisdom? Where did the velvet worm get the recipe for his glue? Who was the chemistry teacher that taught the bombardier beetle that of the 10,025 chemicals listed in the Merck Index, specifically these two when mixed together will instantly reach 212 degrees? No human being could do any one of those things without having been taught how to do it, and humans are infinitely more intelligent and capable than any of these creatures.

The interdependence of the various cycles in the world, and the precision with which they operate is beyond human comprehension. The carbon cycle, the nitrogen cycle, the water cycle, the phosphorous

cycle, and the sulfur cycle are but a few that are needed to sustain life on our planet. Who set these cycles into motion, and who tweaked them to the point where they operate flawlessly in tandem?

Any objective, logical person would have to conclude that there must be a Supreme intelligence behind every single nook and cranny of this world. There is no end to the list of ingenious innovations that we observe and live on daily. Based on new discoveries and continuous advancements in scientific instruments along with super computers, many knowledgeable and advanced scientists have concluded that it is impossible that the world and everything in it happened by chance. They have come to appreciate the Creator, simply by studying His creation, not different than an art *mavin* appreciating the skill of the artist based on the picture in front of him. Many of those scientists have written books explaining in detail how, based on their research, it is impossible for the world to have come about by chance.

This is how the authors of the book *The Privileged Planet*, Guillermo Gonzales and Jay W. Richards summed it up.

Guillermo Gonzales: *“Discoverability of the universe is something we didn’t need for our existence. It is something additional to it. It seems then, that whatever the source of the universe is, it intended that it contain observers who can discover it.*

There’s something about the universe that can’t simply be explained just by the impersonal forces of nature and atoms colliding with atoms. And, so, you have to reach for something beyond the universe to try to account for it.”

Jay W. Richards: *“You put observers in the best places for observing. That is, if you’re going to do things intelligently, that’s*

what you do. The nature of our planet, the nature of its atmosphere, the location in the solar system, the type of solar system it's in, even the type of star that we are around and the location in the galaxy are optimal for making a wide range of scientific discoveries. It turns out that those are also all the most important conditions for a habitable planet, that is, for a planet that is conducive to beings like us, and without which we cannot survive. I think that's just the sort of pattern that ought to suggest to people conspiracy, rather than mere coincidence."

The founders of modern science like Copernicus, and Kepler and Galileo and Newton himself, believed that the universe was the product of a mind, that it was intelligible to beings like ourselves, because the universe itself was the product of an intelligent being."

It is amazing that these two gentile scientists as well as many others like them have discovered what our Sages teach us was Hashem's purpose for making the universe.

The Mishna in Pirkei Avot (6:12) says:

כָּל מַה שֶׁבָּרָא הַקָּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא בְּעוֹלָמוֹ, לֹא בָרָא אֶלָּא לְכְבוֹדוֹ

Everything that Hashem created in His world, He created for His honor.

Hashem created everything in this universe so that through observing the workings of nature we can recognize His greatness and praise Him for it. For this we will be rewarded in the World to Come.

This idea answers another big question. One of the charges of the Mashiach is to convince the entire whole world, Jew and gentile alike, to believe in Hashem. This is expressed in the verse in Tzefania (3:9).

(ט) כִּי אֶזְאָה־פֶּן אֶל עַמִּים שְׂפָה בְרוּרָה לְקַרְא כְּלָם בְּשֵׁם יְדֹד לְעַבְדוֹ שְׂכֵם אֶחָד

9) *For then I will change the nations to speak a pure language, so that they all will proclaim the Name of Hashem, to worship Him with a united resolve.*

What could the Mashiach possibly say that would convince every human being on planet Earth to believe in Hashem and join forces to serve Him with united resolve? Will he also be a magician?

The answer is that when Mashiach comes and all the personal agendas are shown to be false, people will for the first time be able to see things clearly without bias. Without their prejudices clouding the issues, it will be a simple conclusion: just as the garment testifies to a weaver, so, too, the world testifies to Hashem the Creator. People will be kicking themselves and wondering, “How did I not see this? It was so simple! What was I thinking when I thought all this complexity and ingenuity happened by chance? Where was my head when I thought all the beauty and grandeur in the world was the product of mere chance?”

The Torah testifies that under the influence of a bribe it is impossible to see things clearly, compromising the judgment of even the wisest men. That is why they are unable to see even the most obvious truth. This is why Jews don't follow the majority of the world; the majority is under the influence of a bribe and cannot see things clearly and without bias.

There is yet a third approach to answer this question as to why we don't follow the majority of the world and abandon our Judaism. It comes from the ספר הבוזרי *The Kuzari*, written circa 1140 by Rabbi Yehuda Halevi.

In the year 740 CE the king of Kazar, called together a priest, an imam, and a rabbi to learn about their religions. He was very devout in the religion of the Kazars to the point where he alone was the high priest who did all of the sacrifices and service. Despite his efforts to be perfect in his service to his god, he had a recurring dream of an angel telling him that his heart and intentions were beloved to G-d but, his actions were not. He was plagued by this recurring dream, and decided to find out what exactly is the desirable service that G-d is asking for. To this end he invited a leader from each religion to explain what they each believed, so that he could choose the correct one for himself.

After each religious leader presented his religion to the king, he was inclined to go with the Christian religion since they had the largest number of followers, figuring that they were probably correct.

The rabbi objected and said, “Your highness, The Jews are the majority in this matter!”

“How so?” asked the king. “The Jews are but a miniscule number in comparison to the others!”

The Rabbi explained. “The two other major religions in the world with over 4 billion followers (they were not nearly that large 1300 years ago) Christianity and Islam, both agree that the Jewish people were first chosen to be Hashem’s nation. The events of Egypt are undeniable and acknowledged by all religions. Their claim is that the situation has changed. The Christians claim that G-d became angry with the Jews, choosing the Christians to be his nation instead, and the Muslims claim that their prophet Mohamad was the final prophet and that he supersedes all previous prophets (Moshe) and all their teachings. So, the math is very simple. The Christians and the Jews both agree that the Moslems were not G-d’s original chosen nation, and the Moslems and the Jews both agree that the Christians were not G-d’s original

chosen nation. Therefore, they are both in the minority, outnumbered by 2 to 1. **All three religions unanimously agree that the Jews were chosen originally by G-d to be His nation.** They claim, however, that something has changed. We say that such is not the case. G-d promised us in the Torah that He would never abandon us. We have a covenant with Him that is unbreakable. If they claim that G-d has chosen them over us, the burden of proof lies upon the them to prove that something *has* changed. Therefore, we are not just the majority, we are unanimously the chosen people of G-d.

Upon hearing the rabbi's argument, the king had to agree. He chose to learn about Judaism from the rabbi and eventually converted to Judaism along with many people from his country.

Observant Jews live in a world where they are outnumbered by at least 3,500 to 1, an overwhelming ratio that could sometimes causes us to question if we are really doing the right thing. Could so many people be *wrong*, and we, a miniscule few in comparison, are the only ones with the truth? Yet when we think about it rationally and consider all the proofs to the truth of the Torah, we quickly realize that the numbers don't mean much. Upon that realization, we should become overcome with joy and thanksgiving to Hashem for choosing us to be among the select few who have the privilege of knowing the truth of Hashem's existence and why He put us here!