



**Partners In Torah**  
**San Diego-Los Angeles**  
**Study Guide**

***Parshat Shoftim***  
***תשפג***

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***Partners Detroit***

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## *Partners In Torah*

### *Mission Statement:*

## **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 coming!**

**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, billions more people in many other religions, including non-believers. 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 story is told of a prominent Jew whom the Czar summoned to appear in his chambers at a certain time. The Jew was not given directions to the Czar's chambers, and, 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. Since 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 that what he has is real and true, and that everyone else is mistaken, there is no "crowd" to follow.

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

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

יט) לא תטה משפט לא תפיר 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 a fact, not merely a possibility. 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.

תלמוד בבלי מסכת כתובות דף קה/ב

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 someone, 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 as payment takes a percentage of the crops instead of a salary.) This arrangement gives him incentive to generate a greater yield, since the more the field produces, the greater his share.

תלמוד בבלי מסכת כתובות דף קה/ב

ר' ישמעאל ברי' יוסי הוה רגיל אריסיה דהוה מייתי ליה כל מעלי שבתא כנתא דפירי. יומא חד, אייתי ליה בה' בשבתא. אמר ליה, מאי שנא האידנא? אמר ליה, דינא אית לי ואמינא אגב אורחי אייתי ליה למר. לא קביל מיניה. אמר ליה, פסילנא לך לדינא אותיב זוזא דרבנן וקדיינן 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 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) points out another important factor to consider.

If someone said, “So and so is very wealthy,” you would take into consideration who is telling you the information. After all, what does he know about wealth anyway? But if Bill Gates told you that someone is wealthy, you would 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. If Hashem is calling the judge wise, he must really be wise! And still, a bribe will compromise his wisdom and falsify his judgment. There can be no other outcome. This is the way Hashem has made His world.

Maimonides counts the commandment to believe in Hashem as the very first mitzvah in the Torah. Rabbi Elchonon Wasserman 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 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 to adults, and even to the most intelligent people? 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. How is every gentile expected to believe in Hashem? How could *he* be expected to come to belief 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 observation of the world around us reveals a simple and obvious truth - 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 claim 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 a weaver, a door testifies to a carpenter, and a house testifies to a builder, so too, the world and everything in it testifies to Hashem who created it."

Indeed, many a scientist has come to believe in Hashem, the Creator, through scientific research in his field. Through his extensive research upon discovering how something works, the scientist is literally awe struck by the complexity, and brilliance of the system. He is left with no other conclusion as to how such a system could ever have developed, other than to attribute it to an ingenious, all-capable Creator of unfathomable brilliance.

So, if identifying Hashem is such a simple matter such that every child and person in the world is expected to see Him and believe in Him, how do some of the greatest scientists and philosophers not see it?

The answer, says Rabbi Wasserman, is that they are the victims of a bribe and thus cannot see straight.

A man once asked Rabbi Noach Weinberg, זצ"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. "What do you mean? If there's G-d, and 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 a strong incentive to deny G-d's existence. If a Creator – Hashem - exists, that means that He created me for a purpose, and I have a mission in this world - I can't just do what I want to do. I must look into why I am here and spend my life accomplishing my purpose in life. "Why would I choose to believe that, when many scientists say we don't need G-d for the world to exist.



If I accept 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.

In reality, such a person is fooling only himself. A cursory review of the current scientific theories on “The Origin of Life” reveals that no scientist has yet suggested a plausible theory as to how inanimate matter came to life and created our “Living Planet”. To date, there is no explanation as to how life started. Only Hashem can create life, and He has done so for a very important purpose.

This is the power of a bribe. It can totally blind a person to the facts that are plain to see, right in front of his eyes.

This idea answers another big question. One of the jobs of the Mashiach is to convince the whole world, Jew and gentile alike, to believe in Hashem. This is expressed in the verse in Tzefania 3:10.

ט) כִּי אֶזְכָּר אֶת־הַפֶּדִי אֶל עַמִּים שָׁפָה בְרוּרָה לְקִרְאָה כָּל־מִלִּים בְּשֵׁם יְיָ לְעַבְדּוֹ  
שְׂכָם

*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 very 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 were unable to see even the most obvious truth.

There is yet a third approach to answer this question, which comes from the ספר הכוזרי *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 by G-d but that his actions were not. To determine what the desirable service to G-d was, he invited a leader from each religion to explain what they each believed so that he could choose the correct one for himself.

Initially, he was inclined to go with the Christian religion since they had the largest number of followers and he assumed 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 miniscule in number compared 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 miracles that Hashem brought upon Egypt when He chose the Jewish people to be His nation are undeniable and acknowledged as true by all the major religions. They occurred in plain sight for all to see, and no one denies them. However, they claim that the situation has changed. The Christians claim that G-d became angry with the Jewish people, abandoned them and chose the Christians to be His nation instead. The Moslems claim that their prophet Mohamad was the final prophet superseding all previous prophets (Moshe) and all their teachings.

Based on this, the math is very simple. The Christians and the Jews both agree that it is not the Moslems and the Moslems and the Jews both agree it is not the Christians. Therefore, they are both in the minority, outnumbered by 2 to 1. All three religions unanimously agree that the Jews were originally chosen by G-d to be His nation. As far as their claim that something has changed, the burden of proof lies upon the them to prove it. We can prove that nothing 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 kingdom.

Observant Jews live in a world where they are outnumbered by at least 3,500 to 1, an overwhelming ratio that 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 anything. 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!