



**Partners In Torah**  
**San Diego-Los Angeles-Ventura**  
**Take home Dvar Torah**

5785 o  
August , 2025

*By: Rabbi Avi Cohen*

***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.**

## תשפ"ה Shoftim

“Good fences make good neighbors,” goes the saying.\* Visible and clearly defined boundaries and limitations make it easy to respect the property of others. People run into trouble only when it is unclear to them where their domain ends and the other’s domain begins.

Rabbeinu Bachya (1255-1340) begins his commentary on this week’s portion with the verse in Proverbs (3:17) describing the Torah and its laws, as follows:

דרכיה דרכי נועם וכל נתיבותיה שלום

*17) Its ways are pleasant ways, and all of its ways are peaceful.*

Because peace among Jews is so important to Hashem, the Torah commands us to establish a court in every city. The judges will apply the Torah’s peaceful laws to the Jewish people; and with clear guidelines, peace will reign. Yet a police force must also be present to enforce the courts’ judgments, or the courts will lose control. As this portion (Deuteronomy 16:18) commences:

יח) נִשְׁפָּטִים וְנִשְׁטָרִים תִּתֶּן לָהֶם בְּכָל שַׁעְרֵיךָ אֲשֶׁר יִדְוֶה אֱלֹהֶיךָ נִתֵּן לָהֶם לְשִׁבְטֶיךָ וְשִׁפְטוּ אֶת הָעָם מִשְׁפַּט צְדָקָה

*18) You must appoint judges and officers for you in all your gateways (cities) which Hashem your G-d gives you for your tribes, and they shall righteously judge the people.*

The courts’ erudite judges will render clear decisions as far as who is correct and what belongs to whom and thus maintain peace among the masses.

---

\* Robert Frost's 1914 poem "Mending Wall."

Once the court has rendered its decision, the Torah tells us (Deuteronomy 17:11):

(יא) עַל פִּי הַתּוֹרָה אֲנֹכֶה וְעַל הַמִּשְׁפָּט אֲנֹכֶה יִאמְרוּ לְךָ תַעֲשֶׂה לֹא תִסּוּר מִן הַדְּבָר אֲשֶׁר יִגִּידוּ לְךָ יְמִין וּשְׂמָאל

*11) According to the teaching that they will teach you and according to the judgment that they will tell you, shall you do; you shall not deviate from the word that they will tell you, **right or left**.*

Rashi's commentary on these last few words is intriguing and gives us pause:

(יא) ימין ושמאל - אפילו אומר לך על ימין שהוא שמאל ועל שמאל שהוא ימין וכ"ש שאומר לך על ימין ימין ועל שמאל שמאל

*Even if the court tells you that your right (hand) is your left (hand) and that your left is your right, listen to them anyway. And surely when they tell you your right is your right, and your left is your left!*

The *Sifri* adds a dimension of understanding to this. The court will never tell you that your right is your left. Sometimes, though, the judgment that they have rendered looks so off that it looks *to you* as if they have mixed up something as clear and obvious as which hand is your right and which hand is your left. Their decision appears completely backwards! In such a situation, the Torah is instructing us that even when to our understanding they have completely erred, we must still precisely follow that decision and not deviate from it right or left.

That's a tall order! How does Hashem expect a person to go against his own better judgment and follow a decision that he believes is completely wrong?

Our Sages pick up on a nuance in the verse. Why did the Torah choose the example of right and left instead of day and night, or heaven and earth?

Because what is on the right or on the left depends on one's perspective. For example, for a person facing north, east is to his right and west is to his left. Whereas, for a person facing south, west is to his right and east is to his left. What is right or left changes with one's perspective and physical orientation. Similarly, if a person is convinced that he is facing south but, in reality, he is facing due north, he will perceive everything backwards. An objective observer seeing him facing north will have the correct perspective. In a situation such as this, the person would be wise to listen to the observer, even though his perspective seems backwards.

This is the logic behind listening to the court even when they seem to be completely incorrect. The litigants must recognize that the judges are completely objective in the case and have one motive in mind: To render a true decision.

This is the Torah's repeated mandate to the judges:

*18) Judges and officers shall you appoint in all your cities-which Hashem your G-d gives you for your tribes; **and they shall judge the people with righteous judgment.***

To ensure that the judgments are true, the Torah (Deuteronomy 16:19) instructs the judges:

יט) לא תטה משפט לא תביר 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.*

Accepting a bribe impairs the judge's judgment, rendering him unable to judge the case fairly. The Torah here is stating a fact. ***The bribe will blind the eyes of the wise and make just words crooked.*** There is no way to escape this reality. This is how Hashem made the human being.

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

אמר רבא מאי טעמא דשוחדא? כיון דקביל ליה שוחדא מיניה, איקרבא ליה דעתיה לגביה והוי בגופיה; ואין אדם רואה חובה לעצמו. מאי שוחד? שהוא חד  
*Rava said: Why is a bribe forbidden? Once the judge has accepted a bribe he feels close to the briber and he sees him as one with him, and a person doesn't see his own flaws.*

It is human nature to feel close to one who has shown us deference by giving us a present. He has touched our ego, our deepest emotion, and we cannot help but feel a closeness to him for that. Once that happens, we lose our impartiality completely, because a person is blind to his own flaws. He thinks that he is always right.

The Talmud further relates the story of Rabbi Yishmael and his sharecropper. (A sharecropper works someone else's field and, in lieu of a salary, takes a percentage of the crops.) This arrangement gives him incentive to generate a greater yield, since the more the field produces, the greater is 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 וקדיינן ליה בהדי דקאזיל ואתי אמר אי בעי טעין הכי ואי בעי

טען 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 Rabbi Yishmael's field every Friday afternoon in honor of the Shabbat. One week, he brought the basket 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 since I was coming anyway, I would bring you your fruit 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 and 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 had I accepted it, it was my own fruit, the fruit of my field, and I am still looking to find merit for him; 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 a regular person told you, "So and so is very wealthy," you would take into consideration who is relating the information. Does he really know what it means to be wealthy? But, if Bill Gates told you that

someone is wealthy, you would know 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? Does he really know what wisdom is?” In this case, Hashem, the source of all wisdom, is saying that the judge is wise, and yet even the judge that Hashem says is wise will be compromised by a bribe and his judgment will be corrupt. Hence, Hashem is saying, there can be no other outcome, for this is the way that I have made My world.

The bribe to a judge generates a closeness between him and the litigant that prevents the judge from seeing his flaws, but the litigant, being himself, surely cannot see his own flaws. This is how a person can convince himself that he is facing south when in reality he is facing north. He sees matters from his own personal perspective, which doesn't allow objectivity. Being on the “inside,” he cannot see the obvious flaws in his position. An objective person, on the other hand, has no bias and sees matters as they are. This is why the Torah obligates us to accept the judges' judgment and follow it even if it looks to us like they have everything backwards. Due to man's nature, it is we who have everything backwards, because we are biased and are facing the opposite direction.

There is another aspect to why we should listen to the court's judgment. The verse in Psalms (82:1) says,

א) מִזְמוֹר לְאַסָּף אֱלֹהִים נֹצֵב בְּעֵדוּת אֵל בִּקְרֹב אֱלֹהִים יִשְׁפֹּט

1) *A psalm of Asaf: Hashem stands in the Divine assembly, **in the midst of judges shall he judge.***

The Sages understand this to mean that Hashem is present *in the courtroom* assisting the Judges to come to the correct decision. Hashem's

seal is truth, and Hashem is interested in truth in the courtroom. He accordingly assists the judges in their judgments.

This is another reason that one should rely on the court's judgment. The judges have Divine assistance and therefore have impeccable results.

There is another application to this concept of our having to listen to the Sages even if what they say looks to us completely backwards. That is, where the Sages have instituted a law to safeguard a law in the Torah.

An example of this is written in the Mishnah of Shabbat (1:3).

לֹא יִקְרָא לְאוֹר הַנֵּר

*On Shabbat, one is forbidden to read by candlelight.*

The reason is that during the week, as one reads to the light of a candle, should the candle begin to flicker or dim, he automatically adjusts the flame to correct the problem. The Sages were concerned that on Shabbat, when a person is engrossed in his book, should the candle flicker, he will automatically do what he always does without thinking and adjust the flame, which would constitute a violation of the Shabbat. To prevent this easily occurring scenario, the Sages forbade reading to the light of a candle on Shabbat.

Indeed, the Talmud (Shabbat 12b) relates the following incident.

אמר רבי ישמעאל בן אלישע אני אקרא ולא אטה פעם אחת קרא ובקש להטות  
אמר כמה גדולים דברי חכמים שהיו אומרים לא יקרא לאור הנר

*Rabbi Yishmael ben Elisha said, "I can read by the light of the candle, because I will never adjust the flame on Shabbat." Once, however, when his candle flickered, he almost adjusted it, but he caught himself. He then said, "How great are the words of the Sages who said that one should not read to the light of the candle on Shabbat."*

The *Be'er Yosef*, Rabbi Yosef MiSalant, explains that really Rabbi Yishmael was correct about himself. He was so aware and focused on the laws of Shabbat that it would have been impossible for him to adjust the flame. But because he needed to keep the rule (of not reading by candlelight) and he didn't, that violation of the Sages' words caused him to attempt to adjust the light.

The Sages are teaching us that we are not permitted to think that we are the exception to the rule. The rules that the Sages implement are binding on everyone at all times, no exceptions. And even when we think that the reason for the rule no longer applies, we must still keep the rule. We are not allowed to deviate from what they teach us right or left.

It is with this inherent human shortcoming in mind that the Mishnah in Pirkei Avot (1:6) advises us to "Provide yourself with a teacher - a Rabbi."

יְהוֹשֻעַ בֶּן פְּרַחְיָה אוֹמֵר, עֲשֵׂה לְךָ רַב

*Rabbi Yehoshua Ben Prachia says, Provide yourself with a Rav, a teacher.*

On the journey of life, man faces many life altering decisions that require him to have accurate judgment. If his perspective is skewed or distorted, he will surely make the wrong choice. How should a person approach these important and impactful decisions?

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Prachia has provided us with the answer. Choose a rabbi, a holy and learned Sage, and present your questions to him. He will see things from an objective point of view and will guide you to the correct decision. As a holy altruistic individual, he will have only your best interest in mind and by listening to the different aspects of the

question, based on who you are, will always come up with the best solution to your problem.

This has been the true and tried method that the Jewish people have used since Moshe and Aharon. In the Chassidic world, an adherent doesn't make a move without first consulting the "Rebbe," in the Yeshiva world, a Yeshiva student doesn't make a move without consulting his Rosh Yeshiva (Headmaster), and many Orthodox Jews consult with the rabbi of their congregation.

Because the "rav" is a holy and altruistic person, Hashem's guiding hand is ever present in his guidance also. Because the Rav's goal is to help his people, Hashem assists him in his advice, and, therefore, one should not deviate from his judgments right or left also. Even if he tells you your right is your left, or vice versa, you should still trust his advice because it carries with it Divine guidance.

There are many thousands of stories of people who were given what looked like "kooky" advice by holy rabbis, but when they did not deviate right or left from the advice, they experienced the wisdom and salvation in the Rav's words.

Here is one example of many.

Tuvia, a secular Israeli Jew brought up in a secular home, became a "*baal teshuva*" (returned to traditional Judaism) at the age of 20. Fired by a deep sense of commitment to Torah and Mitzvot, he enrolled in a yeshiva and dedicated himself fully to Hashem's service. Just one year after his return to Torah, he contracted a life-threatening disease and passed away.

His teachers and fellow students who had come to admire him for his enthusiasm and devotion to Torah were devastated by his death.

They knew that they would have to pay a “shiva call” to pay their condolences to the boy’s parents but knowing that Tuvia’s parents were furious when he became religious, they did not know what to tell the parents that could possibly console them.

They decided to consult Rabbi Chaim Kanievsky ל"צ, a holy sage whose advice always hit the mark. After hearing them out, the rabbi said, “Tell them that, in truth, their son should have passed away the year before. But, because he became religious, Hashem granted him another year of life to fulfill Torah and mitzvot.”

The rabbis left in a quandary. How could they tell this to the secular parents? This would probably only make them even more upset! They decided not to say it.

When they came to the house, the parents acted exactly as the rabbis expected.

“You religious Jews! What did our son gain by becoming religious? Nothing! He lost everything, including his life!”

With anger and accusations being hurled at them from all sides, the rabbis realized there was nothing that they could say that would console the parents. Under much pressure and with no other option, they decided to say what Rabbi Kanievsky told them to say.

“We spoke to Rabbi Chaim Kanievsky about your son, and he told us that, far from costing your son his life, his becoming religious actually saved his life! The rabbi told us that your son was actually supposed to die last year, but because he became religious, he was granted another year to learn Torah and perform mitzvot.”

There was a sudden gasp from Tuvia’s mother.

“Its true!” she cried out hysterically. Every word the rabbi said is true!”

“You are right,” Tuvia’s father said tears streaming down his eyes. “We blamed you for my son’s death, but the rabbi is right. Becoming religious saved his life!”

When she regained her composure, Tuvia’s mother explained.

“Last year, my son began thinking of keeping the Shabbat, though he wasn’t completely religious yet. About a year ago on Shabbat morning, his old group of friends drove up to the house and tried to convince him to go along with them for some fun. Tuvia thought about it and decided not to join them because it was Shabbat. They drove away laughing and mocking Tuvia for his antiquated beliefs.

Later that day, that group of friends was involved in a car accident and all of them were killed. Had Tuvia gone along with them, he would also have been killed. His decision to keep the Shabbat saved him and gave him an extra year of life. Thank you, you have consoled us for our loss.”

Here is another.

Children from two prestigious Torah families in Bnai Brak became engaged to be married. Neither family had much money to give the couple, and after straining themselves and exhausting every possible avenue, together they could only come up with \$40,000. This would be the money to purchase their apartment, as, in Israel, it is customary to purchase a home for the new couple.

In Bnai Brak, a small two bedroom apartment went for a minimum of \$110,000, and thinking that they would have to purchase the apartment in a neighboring community where apartments were more

reasonable, they consulted one of great Rabbis in Bnai Brak as to in which community they should purchase the apartment.

The Rabbi responded, “In Bnai Brak!”

The parents couldn’t believe what they heard, and at a later point in the conversation reiterated to the Rabbi, “We are talking about buying an apartment, not renting.” The Rabbi repeated, “Bnai Brak,” and wished them success.

Without hesitation, the parents went to their real-estate brokers and told them that they were looking to buy an apartment in Bnai Brak for \$40,000. The real estate brokers thought they were joking, but nevertheless, wrote it down.

A short time later, one of the real estate brokers called to tell them that he had located an apartment for \$40,000. Here was the story. The apartment belonged to an elderly gentleman with no children. It has a large 3 rooms, and he wants to sell two of the rooms for \$40,000, on the condition that he be allowed to live in the third room, and that the purchasers accept to take care of his daily needs until he dies. Whoever is prepared to fulfill these conditions, will receive the two bedrooms now, and when he dies, inherit the third bedroom, making the entire apartment theirs.

The families realized that this was sent from heaven and immediately agreed to the conditions. The contract was signed that day.

The bride and groom realized that caring for the old man would tax their marriage, especially in the very beginning, but they realized that this was a great gift from Hashem, and that Hashem was fulfilling the blessing of the Rabbi. Ultimately, they would have a spacious three room apartment in the heart of Bnai Brak.

The wedding date was set for a month and a half away, and five days before the wedding, the old man passed away. The contract was still on the table, and they inherited the entire apartment before their wedding.

The Sages are privy to secret information that Hashem reveals to them because of their holiness. It may not make sense to us, but if we are prepared to put our trust in them, Hashem will always fulfill their blessing. We would be wise to consult with them and listen carefully to their advice.