

Parashat Shoftim 5780, 2020:

A Time for Introspection

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Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chana bat Shmuel, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Shoshana Elka bat Avraham, Tikvah bat Rivka Perel, Peretz ben Chaim, Chaya Sarah bat Reb Yechezkel Shraga, Shmuel Yosef ben Reuven, the *Kedoshim* of Har Nof, Pittsburgh, and Jersey City, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Mordechai HaLevi ben Miriam Tovah, Moshe ben Itta Golda, Yocheved Dafneh bat Dinah Zehavah, Reuven Shmuel ben Leah, Dovid Shmuel ben Chasiyah and the health and safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

This past week we celebrated Rosh Chodesh Elul — a major step toward our upcoming encounter with the Almighty on Rosh Hashanah. As such, Chodesh Elul emerges as the preeminent time to prepare ourselves to serve Hashem in an authentic and meaningful manner. The great Chasidic master, Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Halevi Epstein (1753-1825), known as “the Maor Vashemesh” after the title of his work on the Torah and Festivals, addresses this crucial topic in his commentary on the first *pasuk* of our *parasha*:

An individual who wants to serve Hashem in truth — is obligated at all times to watch over his actions. This means that it is insufficient for him to merely refrain, G-d forbid, from performing an improper action — rather, [his obligation to be ever watchful] extends even over the positive actions that he performs, including his *tefilah* and Torah studies. [This means that] he must scrutinize them very carefully in order to ascertain whether or not they were performed with the proper measure of awe and love, and if they were completely pure and clear without any type of negative thought, or [performed] in the service of some personal agenda. (*Sefer Devarim* 16:18, translation and brackets my own)

In just a few short words, the Maor Vashemesh presents us with a blueprint for strengthening our relationship with *Hakadosh Baruch Hu*. He begins by teaching us that watchfulness is the key to living a spiritually-infused life. Next, he emphasizes that refraining from performing an untoward action, while clearly necessary, is an insufficient

yardstick by which to measure ourselves. Instead, in order to truly serve Hashem, the Maor Vashemesh asserts that we must ensure that each of our positive actions are invested with the purest intentions, and with sincere awe and love.

The Maor Vashemesh then notes that his analysis is based upon the final words of a well-known passage in *Talmud Bavli, Eruvin* 13b:

Our Rabbis taught: For two and a half years Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel argued. One side said: "It would have been better if man had not been created rather than his having been created." The other side claimed: "It is better that man was created rather than his having not been created." They reached the following conclusion: "It is better that man should not have been created rather than his having been created. Now, however, that he was created, y'phashpfash b'ma'asuv — he should examine his actions." An alternate text reads: y'mashmash b'ma'asuv — He should scrutinize his actions."

What are the substantive differences that obtain between *y'phashpfash*, and *y'mashmash, b'ma'asuv*? We are fortunate that our Sages addressed this very question. The Aruch (Rabbi Yechiel ben Natan, 1035-1110) explains *y'phashpfash b'ma'asuv* as referring to careful inspection of one's actions after having committed a sin. In contrast, *y'mashmash b'ma'asuv*, refers to examining one's potential actions in order to ascertain whether or not they represent meritorious behavior. In theory, at least, these approaches should prevent a person from committing a *chate* (sin) or, at the very least, from repeating it. Rashi (1040-1105) follows the Aruch's approach in reference to *y'phashpfash b'ma'asuv*, and significantly expands upon his analysis of *y'mashmash b'ma'asuv*:

y'mashmash b'ma'asuv – for example, if one has an opportunity to perform a *mitzvah*, he should consider the loss that will obtain due to its non-performance in light of the reward that would accrue as a result of its performance. He should, therefore, not put off its performance because of the [momentary] monetary expenditure, since its reward will surely come in the future. [Moreover,] if the possibility of performing a sin presents itself, he should carefully consider the "benefit" that will immediately accrue over and against the future loss for which he will have to make restitution.

Both the Aruch and Rashi aid us in understanding our terms. In my estimation, however, the most incisive analysis of *y'phashpfash* and *y'mashmash b'ma'asuv* can be found in *Sefer Mesilat Yesharim*, authored by Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto *zatzal* (1707-1746).

Therein, he defines “*pishpush*” (the nounal form of *y'phashpfash*) as:

...to examine all of our actions, in general, and to carefully think about them. [To ascertain] if they contain therein deeds that we ought not to do that do not follow the ways of the commandments and statutes of Hashem. Any actions that fit [this negative criterion] should be destroyed from the world.

In contrast, he defines “*mishmush*” (the nounal form of *y'mashmash*) as:

...the careful and exact analysis of even good actions, to determine and see if they contain any aspect, whatsoever, that is not good or any bad feature that must be removed and destroyed...one must scrutinize his actions [in this fashion] to examine their innermost content, the purpose of this examination to [yield] actions that are pure and perfect. (Translations my own)

A careful reading of these sections from the *Mesilat Yesharim* reveals that the interpretation of the Maor Vashemesh echoes Rav Luzzato's definition of *mishmush*. Since the historical record indicates that the *Mesilat Yesharim* was widely read and cherished by many Chasidic masters of his time it is very reasonable to assume that the Maor Vashemesh, as well, would have encountered and mastered this work, since this gem of ethical literature focuses upon numerous concepts and themes that continuously captured his attention.

May the guidance of these great Torah scholars enable us to examine and perfect our actions so that we may move ever closer to the Almighty, and return to Him in heartfelt and abiding *teshuvah*. *V'chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom, and may Hashem in His great mercy remove the *magafah* from *klal Yisrael* and from all the nations of the world.

Past *drashot* may be found at my blog-website: <http://reparashathashavuah.org>
They may also be found on <http://www.yutorah.org> using the search criteria Etengoff and the *parasha*'s name.

The email list, *b'chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added, please do not hesitate to contact me via email <mailto:rdb718@gmail.com>.

*** My audio *shiurim* on the topics of *Tefilah* and *Tanach* may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpyd>

*** I have posted 164 of **Rabbi Soloveitchik's** English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. Please click on the highlighted link.