



# MISHNAS CHAYIM

# משנת חיים

## MISHNAH ON THE PARSHAH

### פרשת שפטים תשס"ח 5768

## *FOLLOW THE LEADERS*

Observing canine behavior can tell us quite a bit about the state of affairs we find ourselves in today.

### *DOGS AND POLITICS*

If you've ever seen a man leading his dog, you may have noticed something interesting. Oftentimes, the dog will plow ahead by itself. Its owner follows behind, trying to maintain his grip on the leash. When this occurs, it appears as if a great role-reversal has taken place, with the dog leading its master.

That is, until the dog arrives at a junction in the road. Then it stops, unsure of which way to go. It peers back at its master, trying to ascertain the direction towards which the man's face seems to be pointing. Only then does the animal carry on, proceeding along the way which it feels its master has chosen. Thus, the master has 'reaffirmed' his role as the true leader of this pair.

According to R' Yisrael Salanter (quoted in *MiShulchan Govohah, parshas Pinchas, p. 227*), the political/secular leadership operates in much the same way. The Mishnah in Sotah 9:15, which deals with the world's state of affairs during the pre-Messianic era, alludes to this phenomenon.

The Mishnah lists certain adverse conditions which will exist prior to the arrival of Moshiach. Amongst them we find a stark description of the prevailing situation at that time:

בְּעֶקְבוֹת מְשִׁיחָא חֲצָפָא יִסְגָּא... פְּנֵי הַדּוֹר כְּפְנֵי הַכָּלָב.  
"During the pre-Messianic era, chutzpah will be prevalent... the face of the generation will resemble that of a dog."

R' Yisrael Salanter explains the 'dog face' analogy as referring to leaders and officials, whose qualities

will mirror those of the dog described above. At first glance, it appeared to the onlooker that the dog was the one in charge, forging ahead and leading the way. However, when encountering a situation which required some decision-making, the dog needed to look back at the person it was 'leading', in order to ascertain where that individual wished to head. The dog then chose its path based on the preference of the real master.

All too often, we find the same type of 'leadership' amongst political and establishment leaders. It may appear as if they are at the helm; yet when a situation arises that calls for decisive action, what do they do? They take stock of current public opinion, and tailor their policies in accordance. Never mind what is truly good for the constituents; it's what is popular that dictates these leaders' decisions.

### *TRUSTWORTHY LEADERS*

In contrast, Torah leaders have a much different yardstick in determining the proper course of action. The ultimate benefit to the community, the truth, and most of all fulfillment of Hashem's Will, are the factors that govern their leadership practices. In Torah leadership, that which is popular takes a back seat to that which is right and necessary.

This week's *parshah* provides us with an illustration of the esteem with which we should view these Torah leaders:

"Do not deviate to the right or the left from that which they instruct you." (*Devarim 17:11*)

Commenting on the right/left terminology, Rashi clarifies the extent to which we should rely on their guidance: "Even if they will tell you that your right hand is really your left, and your left is your right, you must still adhere faithfully to their words."

Dedicated in loving memory of Mr. Bernard Wiener,  
בערל בן הערש ע"ה,  
by Dr. and Mrs. R. Shanik, Lakewood, NJ

Kindly take a moment to study MISHNAS CHAYIM in the merit of בלימה בת אברהם ע"ה, a fellow Jew who passed away with no relatives to arrange Torah study on behalf of her neshamah.

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MISHNAS  
CHAYIM

# משנת חיים

פרשת שפטים תשס"ח א Parshas Shoftim 5768

The Ramban explains: Even if it *appears* to you that the *chachamim* ‘have it all mixed up’ — as if they are calling the right hand ‘the left’ with regards to the issue at hand — we are still obligated to heed their counsel. The reason? Hashem grants His emissaries a special measure of *siyata d’shmaya* (Divine assistance) in rendering their decisions, in order to spare them from issuing mistaken directives.

Had we been able to achieve their level, and be privy to their *siyata d’shmaya*, we, too, would be able to perceive the accuracy of their conclusions. Lacking this transcendent insight, however, it may appear to us that there was some mix-up here. Therefore, the Torah enjoins us to place our faith in the sages, and to recognize that the only mistake is our initial impression.

To a certain unfortunate extent, this guiding principle has been forgotten in recent times (see the approbation of R’ Aharon Leib Shteinman to the *sefer L’sha’ah U’l’doros*). Yet, even in our days, it behooves us to renew our allegiance and subservience to the guidance of our Torah sages.

For example, if our Torah leaders strongly condemn a particular item or event — even one which we ourselves do not initially perceive as posing a spiritual threat — let us recall the lesson of our *parshah*.

Regarding Torah study, there is a tremendous difference between *not understanding* a particular idea, and deigning something to be ‘wrong’. For example, even the venerable R’ Akiva Eiger, after formulating one of his brilliant questions on a Gemara, would often leave the problem unresolved. He would not conclude, *chas v’shalom*, that the Gemara was *wrong*. He would merely leave off by commenting, “*Tzarich iyun* (further study required).” This statement was a mere recognition that, while a viable solution surely exists, it remains hidden for the time being from our limited comprehension.

Our *parshah* implores us to adopt a similar attitude with regards to Torah leaders and sages. It is possible that there will be instances where we may

not fully understand their actions. It is fine and laudatory to strive to understand their words; however, *concluding* that they are mistaken is another matter entirely. Discontent with Rabbinic directives, be it expressed in an article, letter to the editor, verbal comment to a friend, or even in the confines of one’s own mind, runs contrary to the Torah’s ideals. (Needless to say, criticism and denigration of Torah scholars is a serious offense which carries severe consequences; cf. *Sanhedrin 99b, Eruvin 21b*).

Rather than jumping to erroneous conclusions, let us appreciate the fact that Hashem supplies us with leaders who are guided by Torah-true principles, and not public opinion polls.

In order to better appreciate the real stature of a *gadol b’torah*, it is helpful to understand what the essence of a *gadol* is. Next week, *im yirtzeh Hashem*, we will elaborate on just that.

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