

Parshat Shoftim

Who Are the Guardians of the City?

Rabbi Daniela Szuster

This week's parsha, parshat Shoftim, begins by saying: "You shall appoint magisters and officials for your tribes, in all settlements that the Lord your God is giving you, and they shall govern the people with due justice" (Devarim 16:18).

This verse literally expresses the importance of having judges and policemen in each one of the cities, granting justice and equity to the inhabitants.

However, some sages interpreted this verse differently. In the verse it says: "Judges and offices shalt thou make thee..." (Titen Lecha). The sages call attention to the words "thou make thee;" saying that one should judge himself first, and after that, one may judge his fellowman. In other words, we should be our own judges and policemen.

According to the commentary "Sh'nei Luhot Ha-b'rot" "in all the settlements," literally, "at all your gates," means that we must set guardians at the gates of our souls, our mouths – so that we don't lie or speak malicious gossip, our ears – so that we are not eager to hear malicious gossip, and our eyes – so that we are not seeing the worst in others.

It is not a coincidence that we read Parashat Shoftim during the month of Elul, the month when we should be our own judges so that on Rosh Hashanah God will judge us after our own introspection.

Returning to the first verse of this week's parashah, there is an interesting story in the Jerusalem Talmud that I would like to share with you:

Rabbi Judah, the prince, sent Rabbi Chia, Rabbi Asi, and Rabbi Ami to go through all the little cities of Eretz Israel and establish in them teachers and educators.

[After a few days] they reached a village where they could not find any. [So they went to the local authorities and] said to them: "[Please] introduce us to the guardians of the city."

The authorities brought the [soldiers] that guard [the walls of] the city.

[The rabbis] said: "Are these the guardians of the city? These are the destroyers of the city!"

[Amazed, the local authorities] asked: "Then who are the guardians of the city?" [The rabbis] answered: "[the guardians are] the teachers and educators, just as it is written: 'Except the Lord build the house, they labor in vain that build it.' (Psalm 127:1) (Jerusalem Talmud, Tractate Chagigah 2:7).

This story has forged and inspired the Jewish concept of education for generations.

We, as Jews, are proud that historically the levels of literacy among our people have always been very high, and that no matter the economic situation of the families in each community, every child would learn to read at the age of five in order to be able to begin the study of the Torah.

The role of the moreh/morah (or teacher) as the guardian of the city is a strong metaphor. Without teachers, the cities would not physically fall, but without a solid education base, no social structure can endure.

The scholars of our tradition are builders. When educational construction slows down or stops, our tradition identifies that as a synonym for danger.

When the conduits through which learning is made possible are blocked, societies end up losing their identities, their cultures are diluted, and their members lose the qualities that make them special.

Following this Midrash, the real guardians of our societies should be the teachers, the educators, the people who transmit the values of respect, solidarity, and peace.

In this week's parasha, when we read about the guardians of the cities, take a time to reflect upon who should be the real and important guardians of our societies and how we can support Jewish education and the continuity of our tradition.