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Parashat Shoftim

The Great *Segula* for Having Our Prayers Accepted – Guarding Our Mouths

Our *parasha* states (*Devarim* 16:18), "Judges and officers should you make for yourselves in all your gates that Hashem, your G-d, has given you according to your tribes; and they should judge the nation a righteous judgment."

Questions

1. Rav Chaim Vital asks why the *pasuk* says "*lecha*" in the singular. Here the Torah is referring to the entire Jewish Nation. It would seemingly have been more appropriate to use the plural expression "*lachem*?"
2. Why does it say "in all your **gates**" and not "in all your **cities**?"
3. Our Sages understand that whenever the language "*lecha*" is used regarding a mitzvah, it is for our benefit. For example: The *Zohar* writes that Moshe Rabbeinu was told to take spices for himself ("*lecha*") to make the *ketoret*. He would benefit from the *ketoret* since the *ketoret* purifies spiritual defilements and makes the prayers and Divine service pleasing to Hashem. The Torah tells Aharon to take for himself ("*lecha*") a calf to bring as a *korban*. This is to Aharon's advantage, because he will get atonement for his sin with the Golden Calf, and he will then be able to atone for the rest of the Jewish people. Rav Chaim Vital, in his *sefer Eitz Hada'at*, asks the Torah writes regarding *Sefirat Ha'omer*, "You should count for yourselves" ("*usfartem lachem*"). Yet how do we benefit from it? He explains that the benefit is that we make a spiritual accounting for the past and therefore improve in the future. That being the case, what is beneficial for us to appoint judges and officers, as here too it says "*lecha*?"

Speech: An Area Where Many Stumble

Many people have great difficulty in controlling their speech. This is because a person does not consider his words to be of value, and he moves his mouth without giving much thought as to what will come out. This is especially true in today's times, when we have all types of communication devices that make it easy to send messages to others - we don't think twice about what we are actually saying. Nobody thinks that there's anything wrong with this, since we're not really doing anything - it's only words. However, our holy Torah teaches us that this is not the case. Our words have great importance and they can hurt others and be the source of tragedy. A person is obligated to take great care of his mouth, even more so than his other limbs.

Rav Chaim Vital's Allusion

In the *Sefer Lekutim* from Rav Chaim Vital (*Parashat Shoftim*), he writes that the reason the Torah does not write "*lachem*," but uses the singular expression "*lecha*," is to hint to us that every single person in the Jewish nation has many gates ("*she'arim*"). He has a gate for his vision – his eyes; a gate for hearing - his ears; a gate for speech – his mouth; a gate for smell – his nose, and a gate for touch – his hands and feet. A person must appoint judges and officers in all these gates to protect himself from looking at improper sites or listening to improper words *rachmana litzlan*. He should have them to ensure that he doesn't speak coarse language nor spread gossip; avoids



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smelling the perfumes of forbidden women or touching them with his hands; using his feet to go to places of sin or of forbidden entertainment. This is why it says "*she'arecha*" in the singular – to hint to us that we should take care that all our gates are carefully protected. This is especially true in our days with the explosion of technology, which makes it so easy for a person to fall into the net of the evil inclination, and technology has already claimed many victims. A person should appoint a judge for himself and think what benefit he will have from looking at a forbidden sight; he will only defile himself and will anyways not succeed in satisfying his desires. He will only continue to sink lower and lower until he has lost all sensitivity for holiness.

The Difference Between the Mouth and the Other Gates:

Iyov says (19:26), "From my flesh I have seen Hashem." When a person looks at his body, he will be able to understand what Hashem wants from him. Therefore, we should try to understand why the eyes and ears were only given one guard (the eye lids and ear lobes) while the mouth was given two (the teeth and lips). The obvious explanation is that that Hashem gave us twice as many guards for the mouth, because He wants us to be extremely careful with it, even more than with all our other openings. This is similar to the precautions a person takes from danger - the greater the danger, the more means a person will take to protect himself. Since Hashem created us, knows our natures, and with that knowledge gave us twice as many guards for the mouth, we see that there is a tremendous danger of stumbling and sinning with our mouths, more so than with any other part of our body.

The Seriousness of Lashon Hara

We must be especially careful in avoiding *lashon hara* – speaking negatively about others. The Gemara in *Erachin* (15b) says that the severity of *lashon hara* is greater than the three worst sins - murder, adultery, and idol worship. The *Chafetz Chaim* writes in his introduction, that a person can come to transgress 30 commandments if he regularly speaks *lashon hara*. Moreover, the *malach* told the *Beit Yosef* (*Maggid Mesharim Parashat Vayakhel*) that when a person speaks *lashon hara* about his fellow, the speaker's merits are taken away from him, and the sins of the one he spoke against are given to him instead. This is completely true. If a person would know this, he would send the person who speaks ill about him a present of gold and silver. The *Sefer Chovot Halevavot* (*Sha'ar Vav*) says the same idea. It relates the story of a pious man who heard that somebody had spoken ill of him, and so he sent his defamer a present. When questioned about his strange behavior he said, "This person sent me a present – his merits, so I am sending him a present as well."

If Someone Speaks *Lashon Hara* His Prayers are not Accepted

The *Shelah* writes that it is known that whoever contaminates his mouth and his tongue with forbidden speech, all his Torah and prayers are also defiled. His Torah and prayers are therefore not allowed into the presence of Hashem. Instead, he receives a punishment because of them. This is similar to somebody who brings a present to a king and puts his gift inside a container full of disgusting things. Certainly, the king will be furious with him. Since this is the case, how can a person get up and pray to Hashem on these awesome days, when his mouth and tongue are defiled much like the disgusting container brought to the king? *Rachmana litzlan*, he will certainly be



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punished for presenting such a gift (prayer) to Hashem. Therefore, to give his prayer the ability to be accepted, a person is obligated to make sure that his mouth is clean from all impurity.

Rashbi's Request for Two Mouths

According to the *Shlah*, we can understand the words of the *Yerushalmi* (*Berachot* 1:2). Rav Shimon Bar Yochai said, "If I was at Har Sinai, I would have asked for two mouths, one mouth to speak Torah and one mouth for mundane things. It is inappropriate for Torah to be spoken with the same mouth that one uses for mundane things, [and we should] distinguish between holy and profane. According to what we said from the *Shlah*, we can explain *Rashbi's* words. *Rashbi* knew that it's very difficult for a person to cleanse and prepare his mouth to talk and present a verbal gift to Hashem. That is why he wanted to have a separate mouth just for holy things. However, *Rashbi* later changed his mind and said that he would not have made this request. We see how much *lashon hara* a person speaks with one mouth – how much more so would he speak with two! The loss would outweigh the gain.

Words of Mussar

We see from all this how important it is to prepare ourselves for the Days of Mercy and High Holy Days by watching our mouths and preparing them to bring a gift, our prayers, to Hashem. At this time, we should try to use our mouths only for the good, as this is a great *segula* for our prayers to be accepted with mercy. If a person does not contaminate his words then whatever comes out of his mouth will come to fruition. Who in our times does not need salvation and mercy in the upcoming days? Through taking care with our speech, may we merit that our prayers be accepted and that we should be sealed for a good life.

Shabbat Shalom

Rav Mordechai Malka