

Parashat Mishpatim 5774 (2014)

Dear Chavraya,

In what voice does the soul speak? Is there a soul voice that is common to all people, derived from a common source? What about the voice of our own soul that speaks within ourselves? There are times when the voice of Jacob and the hands of Esau are reversed, times when each one of us does wrong, when the sword is raised to destroy rather than the voice to soothe. Is it that we don't hear the true voice of our soul then? Or is something wrong in the soul's own understanding of itself, or in the way of its receiving insight from the Source of Life from which it comes? What does the voice of the soul sound like, timbre and tone not matters of speech and sound, but of moral quality expressed and made audible in the nature of our deeds.

These questions come to me through a beautiful teaching of the Slonimer Rebbe on this week's Torah portion, *Parashat Mishpatim*. It is a teaching that is uplifting and empowering, but on reflection also challenging in the questions it raises. The Slonimer responds to one of the most famous phrases in the Torah. Standing at Mount Sinai, the Torah about to be given, the People of Israel respond all as one, *Na'aseh v'nishma/we will do and we will hear*. One of many questions raised by the eager response of the people at Sinai is how can we do before hearing what we are to do? How can we fulfill the ways and words of Torah before the Torah is given?

Looking at the precedence given to doing over hearing, the Slonimer teaches more broadly that there is a way of knowing what we are to do that precedes Torah, which therefore stands independently of Torah. It is not simply a question of how the people at Sinai could have responded that they would do before being told what to do. The Slonimer then challenges each one of us, pressing us to consider how we are to act when faced with a particular situation that is not addressed by the Torah, or for which we are not able to draw in the moment on specific teaching and guidance. The Slonimer writes that one is *to do the will of God even in regard to matters that are not explicitly commanded; even if they are not written in the commandments of the Torah, it is the will of God by which one knows whether to do or not to do*. In regard to all acts of moral consequence the Slonimer emphasizes that we are to ask, *ma hu ratzon Hashem ba'zeh/what is the will of God in this?* The question, of course, is how do we know the will of God? The Slonimer answers very simply, *nishmat adam t'lalmdenu/a person's soul will teach them*.

It is a powerfully simple teaching, so affirming and positive in its respect for human moral agency. We also know, as the Slonimer surely did, how brutally human beings can act. Does the soul speak in different voices, or do people not

hear the true voice of their soul? Always uplifted by the Slonimer's optimism and faith, I found myself wondering this year, challenged by the very teaching that I have so embraced. If the soul's way of knowing God's will is planted within each one of us, is there an objective standard by which to know something felt so subjectively?

Even in regard to what is not specified, the Torah guides us in fostering a way of response to life and to people. The Torah instructs our souls in the ongoing way of our encounter with Torah. The hope is that through engagement with Torah as a way of life, we will know how to respond when out in the world, guided by the spirit of Torah as it has come to be internalized, as it speaks to our souls. So in the same Torah portion, prior to the saying of *na'aseh v'nishma/we will do and we will hear*, we are reminded not to oppress the stranger, *for you were strangers in the land of Egypt*. We are warned not to let the orphan or the widow "feel their dependent state." We are told not to pass by our enemy who is in need of assistance. An ethos and spirit emerges that is meant to guide and train us beyond the specific cases to which they speak. Expressed through enough *mitzvot* to make it clear, we come to know the will of God. The spirit of Torah as it speaks God's desire for goodness, for wholeness, becomes the voice of the soul. It is the voice that is meant to become our own, still and small at times, welling up in word and deed, continuing to be heard even as we do, *na'aseh v'nishma*.

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Victor