

Parashas

SHOFTIM

Perceptions • Elul 2, 5786 • August 15, 2026 • Issue #2160

This week's parsha resonates with me deeply, and it always has. In truth, I am not entirely sure why. Many other parshiyos contain narratives and information more aligned with what I typically focus on and write about these days. Yet, something about the tone of Shoftim makes it feel closest to our everyday reality.

It begins with what feels like a sobering mitzvah. The commandment to establish courts is not inherently depressing; it is an expression of an eternal Divine concept. However, the requirement to set up judges and police to enforce decisions is a blatant reminder of the fractured reality we fell to after the incident of the Golden Calf.

Think of a patient told by their doctor how to protect an injury and facilitate recovery. They need the information and are grateful for it. Ultimately, however, they would rather not need it at all. They would prefer that the injury had never occurred to reduce their health and complicate their life.

Complications from injuries can breed further illness. Side ef-

fects from medications can treat one symptom while weakening another part of the body. Health is tricky when a person is well, but it becomes far more complex when they are not.

Likewise, this parsha moves on to other mitzvos designed to keep evil at bay—evil made possible by the sin of the Calf. We read of people who leave the path of Torah and become *Bliya'al*. As Rashi explains, this means *bli ole*—living without the yoke of Heaven.

They do not simply become secular; they actively entice other Jews to worship the wrong things. They chose stone and idols in those days; they choose money and fame in ours. Some even become false prophets, preaching ideas entirely contrary to the Torah. It is not enough that they turned their backs on God; they feel compelled to drag others down with them.

When an entire city falls to this, it becomes an *Ir Nidachas* (a city led astray), requiring the total destruction of both its people and property. This post-Calf reality also necessitates cities of refuge for accidental murderers, and the ritual of the *Eglah Arufah* when a murder victim is found outside city limits with no known killer.

None of this would have been necessary had the *Erev Rav* (mixed multitude) not left Egypt with the Jewish people, instigated the sin, and built the Golden Calf. Had they not, Moshe Rabbeinu would never have broken the First Tablets. He would have brought them down for the Jewish people to live by eternally. The *yetzer hara* (evil inclination) we vanquished by declaring "*Na'aseh v'nishma*" (We will do and we will understand) would have remained conquered. The human vices that drive the problems in this week's parsha would be entirely irrelevant.

Does this mean the mitzvos are not eternal? The underlying concepts are eternal, but their physical manifestations vary

based on where humanity stands in history. Had we received the First Tablets, Tefillin would not be the black leather boxes we know today. It would have been a completely different spiritual experience.

The Zohar explicitly states this. Therefore, when you place those black leather boxes on your arm and head, and wrap those straps according to halachah, know this: you are touching a physical mitzvah born of the Second Tablets' era, but you are channeling an eternal concept rooted in the First. The tunnel to truth became longer because of the calf, but it remains a single path leading straight to God.

As we approach Rosh Hashanah, we have to take this to heart. From the outside, Torah Judaism just seems like a lot of rituals that interfere with everyday life to an outsider, and even to an "insider" with an outsider view. But they remain the way by which we draw our souls out in order to connect to God in a more ultimate sense. Our judgment is really just a measurement of how successful we have been.

Have a great Shabbos and inspiring Elul, b"H.

Pinchas Winston