

Parshas Shoftim

A PARABLE WITH A MESSAGE

**Parshas Shoftim
– The Month of Elul**

שׁוּם תְּשִׁים עָלֶיךָ מֶלֶךְ אֲשֶׁר יִבְחָר ה'
אֱלֹקֶיךָ בּוֹ

In a vast and distant land, once ruled a mighty king whose name was known from one end of the kingdom to the other. Whenever people spoke of the king, they did so with a mixture of awe, reverence, and affection. Everyone knew that he was not merely a powerful ruler, but a king who truly carried the welfare of the people in his heart.

The king lived in a magnificent palace in the heart of the capital city, perched high atop a towering mountain. From miles away, one could see the golden spires of the palace gleaming beneath the rays of the sun. Surrounding the palace were massive stone walls, iron gates, and watchtowers, where guards stood day and night.

Inside were long corridors lined with costly carpets, enormous halls lit by golden chandeliers, and countless royal servants and ministers. Deep within the palace, beyond still more doors and guards, stood the king's private chamber. There he sat upon his throne and directed the affairs of the entire kingdom.

In that kingdom, there was simply no such thing as an ordinary person deciding one morning to travel to the palace and hoping he would be allowed to meet the king. Anyone who wished to speak with the king, or present a request before him, first had to send a formal letter to the royal offices asking permission for an audience. The letter had to include the person's name, the city or village from which he came, and a written request explaining that he wished for the opportunity to stand before the king and speak with him.

But even that did not mean that he would receive an answer. The letter first arrived at one office, from there it was passed to another official, and afterward to a higher minister. Only if each one decided that the request was worthy of consideration would it continue onward.

The person might wait for weeks, checking his mailbox every day to see whether perhaps a reply had finally arrived from the royal palace. At last, after a long wait, a letter bearing the royal seal would arrive. With trembling

hands, the man would open it, certain that this must finally be his permission to appear before the king.

But no. The letter merely informed him that before his request could even be considered, he would first have to explain precisely why he wished to see the king. What was his matter? Why could it not be handled by a local official, and why was his request important enough that the king himself should devote his attention to it?

He was required to write out the entire matter in full detail and send the letter back to the palace. Once again, the man would sit down to write, describing his entire difficulty carefully and at length. He would explain why there was no other solution and plead that he be granted even a few minutes in which to speak with the king.

The letter would once again be sent by royal post to the capital, and once again the waiting would begin. A week passed, then two, then a month. And even if the request was finally approved, the reply still did not say, “Come tomorrow.”

Instead, he was merely informed that his name had been placed on the list of those awaiting a **royal appointment**. Ahead of him were already dozens of others—ministers, wealthy merchants, dignitaries, and messengers from distant cities—and every one of them was waiting for his turn. Another month might pass, and then another.

Until finally, after months of waiting, the long-awaited letter arrived. On such-and-such a day, at such-and-such an hour, he was permitted to present himself at the first gate of the royal palace. The letter made it clear that he had to arrive at the precise appointed time, dressed appropriately for one who was entering the presence of the king, and carrying all his documents and confirmations.

When he arrived at the palace, he would once again be questioned at the first gate. From there, he might have to wait until a guard escorted him into the second courtyard, where his name would be checked against the official list. And even after all of that, he could still be required to wait for hours before his turn finally came to enter the royal chamber.

That was the system. **To receive just a few minutes with the king required months of letters, applications, explanations, approvals, and waiting.** And precisely because of this, most ordinary people never even dared to begin the process.

The very thought of the long weeks and months of waiting was enough to discourage them. There were letters that had to be written, questions that had to be answered, approvals that had to be secured, and endless gates and guards that had to be passed. Many people lost courage before they even began.

They would say to themselves, “What chance do I have of ever reaching the king? I am only a simple person.” And so their requests, their troubles, and their pain remained locked up within their hearts. They did not even attempt to approach the king.

That year, however, everything suddenly began to fall apart. A large customer who owed him a considerable sum of money disappeared from the area, the price of merchandise rose, and business in the marketplace remained weak for weeks. Before long, Reb Yudel found himself buried beneath a debt that grew larger from day to day.

In one of the small villages, several days’ journey from the capital, there lived a simple Jew by the name of Reb Yudel. He owned a small shop at the edge of the marketplace, where he sold flour, oil, firewood, pieces of cloth, and various household items needed by the villagers. Reb Yudel was no wealthy man, but for many years he had worked honestly and tirelessly to support his family, raise his children, and pay his debts on time.

That year, however, everything suddenly began to fall apart. A large customer who owed him a considerable sum of money disappeared from the area, the price of merchandise rose, and business in the marketplace remained weak for weeks. Before long, Reb Yudel found himself buried beneath a debt that grew larger from day to day.

His landlord had already warned him that unless he paid by the end of the month, he would have to leave

his home. Every night, after the children had fallen asleep and the house had grown quiet, Reb Yudel sat at the table with his head in his hands. His wife would look at him anxiously and whisper, “Yudel, what will become of us?” And he had nothing to answer.

One night, after spending hours turning every possible solution over in his mind, he suddenly rose from his chair. “I am going to the king,” he declared. His wife stared at him with wide eyes, certain she had misunderstood. “To the king?” she repeated.

“Yes,” said Reb Yudel. “Who else can help me if not the king? One word from him can stop the creditors. One order from him can help me earn a livelihood. He can issue a command and change everything. I have no one else left to turn to.”

His wife did not argue, but she knew what every ordinary citizen knew: the king lived in the palace, and one did not simply walk into the palace as though entering a neighbor’s home. Still, Reb Yudel decided that he had to try. Before sunrise, he packed a piece of bread and a little food for the road, locked his shop, and set out on the long journey to the capital.

The road was difficult and exhausting. He walked through rain, across muddy roads, and through unfamiliar villages. At times he traveled on foot, and at other times he managed to hitch a ride on a passing wagon for part of the way. At night he slept in cheap inns, and before dawn he was already back on the road.

Throughout the entire journey, only one thought kept him going: “When I finally stand before the king, I will tell him everything. He will see what I am going through. Surely he will have mercy on me.” At last, from a distance, he saw the massive walls of the capital and the golden towers of the royal palace.

His heart began to pound, and his exhaustion seemed to disappear. The salvation he had dreamed of suddenly felt so close. But when he arrived at the first royal gate, a guard stopped him with a cold stare.

“Where are you going?” the guard demanded. “I wish to speak with the king,” Reb Yudel replied, his voice trembling with emotion. The guard looked him up and down and asked, “Do you have an invitation?”

Reb Yudel shook his head. “A letter from a minister?” Again, no. “An approved request?” Again, no.

Reb Yudel tried to explain. “I have a terrible problem. I have traveled from very far away. I need only one minute with the king—one minute! I will not take much of his time.”

But the guard raised his hand. “I cannot allow you inside. Those are the rules.” Reb Yudel pleaded and begged, and even asked whether he might simply wait near the gate until some opportunity arose.

But the guard replied, “You can stand here for an entire year, and without permission you still will not be allowed inside.” Reb Yudel stood before the palace gate like a man whose life had been shattered. Only a few hours earlier, he had imagined himself standing before the king and pouring out his heart; now he could not even pass the first gate.

For a long while, he could not bring himself to turn away. He stared at the towering walls and the magnificent palace, knowing that somewhere inside sat the king, perhaps only a few hundred steps away. Yet to Reb Yudel, the king felt as distant as though he were at the other end of the globe.

At last he turned around and began the journey home, more broken than when he had arrived. The return trip felt far more difficult, because now even the hope that had carried him on his journey to the capital was gone.

Several weeks passed, and the situation at home did not improve. Reb Yudel worked harder, sold whatever he could, and begged his creditors for more time. But the debt hung over him like a dark cloud.

Then, one summer morning, while Reb Yudel stood in his shop unpacking a small box of merchandise, he suddenly heard a great commotion in the marketplace. People were running from one side to the other, children raced between the houses, and from every direction came the same cry: “The king is coming! The king is coming!”

Reb Yudel rushed out of his shop and grabbed one of the running men by the sleeve. “What are you talking about? Which king?” The man nearly laughed. “Which king? Our king! He has left the capital and is traveling through the towns and villages of the kingdom. They say that today he will be passing through the great field beside our village!”

Reb Yudel thought he must be dreaming. The very same king to whom he had traveled so far, the very same

king whose first gate he had not even been permitted to cross, was now coming here—to the simple field beside his village.

Within minutes, the entire area was alive. Shopkeepers closed their stores, workers left their jobs, elderly men came out leaning on their canes, and children climbed onto stones and fences so they could see better. No one wanted to miss the moment.

Reb Yudel also went toward the field, but unlike the others, he did not run. He walked slowly, his heart pounding so loudly that he could almost hear every beat. After some time, the sound of horses could be heard in the distance, followed by the rumble of royal carriages.

A cloud of dust rose along the wide road, and through it appeared the royal banner. The crowd began to press forward. Everyone assumed that the carriage would simply pass by and that perhaps they would catch a glimpse of the king through the window.

But suddenly, the carriage stopped. The door opened, and to everyone's astonishment, the king himself stepped down into the field. Not in a golden palace, not seated high upon a throne, and not hidden behind rows of ministers and officials.

He stood upon the very same earth as the ordinary people. The dust of the field lay beneath his feet, the sunlight shone upon his face, and a warm smile rested upon his lips. At that moment, the entire atmosphere changed.

At first, the people were afraid to approach, but the king himself motioned for them to come closer. A small child was the first to step forward, and the king bent down and listened to what he had to say. Next came an elderly farmer who was having trouble with his field, and the king listened patiently.

Another person approached with a request concerning his family, and another came with a complaint about a government official. The king received every one of them graciously. He did not ask who was important and who was not, who was wealthy and who was poor, or who had connections and who did not.

He demanded no documents, no letters, and no approvals. There were no iron gates in the field, and there was no wall standing between the king and the simplest man.

Reb Yudel stood at a distance, almost unable to move. In his mind, he saw again the palace, the guard, the locked gate, and the words, "You cannot come inside." And now, before his very eyes, he watched an ordinary villager—someone even simpler than himself—walk directly to the king and speak with him.

Someone standing beside him nudged him gently. "Reb Yudel, what are you waiting for? Go! Now everyone can approach." Those words pierced his heart.

Now everyone can approach.

Reb Yudel took one step, and then another. With every step, fear and embarrassment struggled within him against hope. At last, he stood close to the king.

The king turned toward him, looked at him with a gentle smile, and asked, "What is weighing on your heart?" That was all Reb Yudel needed to hear. In a single moment, all the weeks of fear, worry, debt, and tension came pouring out.

He burst into tears, not because he had planned to cry, but because his heart could no longer contain all the pain it had carried. "My king," he said through his tears, "I already came to you once. I traveled for days to reach the capital. I stood at the gate and begged them to let me in, but they would not even allow me to pass the first guard."

The king looked at him warmly and replied, "In the palace, there is a different order. **But now I have come to you. Tell me everything.**"

And Reb Yudel did.

He told him about his little shop, about the customer who had disappeared, about his debts, his landlord, and his children. He told him about the long nights when he and his wife sat together at the table, wondering what tomorrow would bring.

And the king did not merely hear his words—he listened. He listened with patience and warmth, with a gracious and welcoming expression, as though among all the affairs of the vast kingdom, there was nothing more important at that moment than the troubles of this simple Reb Yudel.

When Reb Yudel had finished, the king called one of his officials. "Write down his name," he instructed, "and make certain that he is helped." Reb Yudel could hardly believe what he was hearing.

With tears in his eyes, he bowed before the king. As he walked back toward the village, he turned around again and again, wanting to etch the sight permanently into his heart:

The king was standing there, in the middle of the field, among the ordinary people—

and everyone could approach him.

THE INTERPRETATION.....

And this is the great and holy lesson of the month of **Elul**. Throughout the year, it is not always so simple to draw close to Hashem on a lofty level. A person who wishes to “ascend the mountain of Hashem,” to rise above his ordinary spiritual condition and attain a deeper closeness and attachment to Hashem, must work on himself. He must refine his character, sanctify his body and soul, learn more Torah, daven with greater concentration, purify his middos, and climb from one spiritual level to the next.

Such growth requires avodah, effort, perseverance, and a long journey. In this sense, Hashem is, so to speak, like a king sitting deep within his royal palace. The king is certainly there, and everyone knows of him, but not everyone can simply walk straight inside. There are gates and barriers to pass through, and one must prepare himself and become worthy of standing closer to the King.

But when the month of Elul arrives, everything changes. The King leaves the palace and goes out into the field, to the very place where the ordinary people are found in the midst of their everyday lives. Hashem, so to speak, draws near to every Jew exactly where he is at that moment.

Not only after a person has already purified himself, not only after he has reached great spiritual heights, and not only after he has corrected every weakness and fault. Exactly as he is now—with his struggles, his challenges, his failures, and even with the dust of the “field” still clinging to him—he can go out to meet the King. During Elul, Hashem removes, so to speak, many of the barriers and obstacles and gives every Jew a special opportunity to draw near, to return, and to form a renewed and deeper connection with Him.

And there is something even greater. The King is not merely present and allowing people to approach Him; He receives each person **בסבר פנים יפות ובפנים שוחקות** — **with a gracious and smiling countenance**. He does

not say, “Why did you not come sooner?” He does not ask, “Where have you been all year?”

Instead, He receives every Jew with love and mercy, as though saying, “Come closer. I want you near Me. I have been waiting for you.” This is the extraordinary kindness of Elul. A person does not first have to become a tzaddik before he can return to Hashem. Quite the opposite: Hashem comes toward him so that he will be able to begin returning. The King comes out to meet him in the field and makes the path easier, closer, and more open.

For this reason, Elul should awaken within a Jew not only seriousness and awe, but also tremendous joy. When a person realizes that the King has come so close to him, that the gates are open, and that Hashem is, so to speak, standing there with a smile waiting only for him to come closer, how can he not rejoice? Certainly, Elul is a time for cheshbon hanefesh, for teshuvah, for good resolutions, and for preparing ourselves for the Yamim Noraim. But all of this should be accompanied by a deep inner joy.

It should not be a teshuvah born of despair or hopelessness, but a teshuvah born from the powerful realization that **Hashem wants me to come closer. The King has come out to meet me.** That very realization gives a person the courage to begin again and to believe that every sincere step has tremendous value.

What is asked of us during these precious days? In practical terms, just one thing: **Go out to meet the King.** Take advantage of this holy opportunity. When your heart is stirred even slightly, do not allow that inspiration to pass unnoticed. Say another chapter of Tehillim, learn a little more Torah, pay greater attention to your davening, improve one middah, make peace with someone, or accept upon yourself one small kabbalah that will bring you closer to Hashem.

A person may think, “What difference can my small

resolution possibly make?” But when the King is standing in the field, even one small step toward Him is incredibly precious. The main thing is not to remain standing at a distance, merely knowing that the King is there; one must go out to meet Him. As the possuk says: “שובו אלי ואשובה אליכם” — **“Return to Me, and I will return to you.”**

With this idea, the holy Baal HaTanya explains a profound question. During the month of Elul, the holy Yud-Gimmel Middos HaRachamim, the Thirteen Attributes of Divine Mercy, shine with a tremendous revelation of compassion. Those same Thirteen Attributes of Mercy are revealed with great intensity on Yom Kippur. If so, one may ask: Why is Yom Kippur the holiest day of the year, a day completely elevated above ordinary life through fasting, prayer, and holiness, while Elul remains, seemingly, an ordinary month of weekdays?

Why were the days of Elul not established as Yamim Tovim if such a powerful revelation of the Yud-Gimmel Middos HaRachamim shines during this month? If the spiritual light is so great, should not the days themselves also be visibly different from the rest of the year?

The answer lies precisely within this mashal. Yom Kippur represents the state of **“the King in His palace.”** In order to enter the palace and stand before the King there, we prepare ourselves. We do not eat or drink, we dress in a manner reminiscent of malachim, we spend long hours in prayer, recite Vidui, do teshuvah, and separate ourselves throughout the day from the ordinary concerns of this world.

On Yom Kippur, a person rises above his usual condition and, so to speak, enters the royal palace. He leaves behind the regular rhythm of life and devotes himself entirely to holiness, prayer, forgiveness, and closeness to Hashem. That is why Yom Kippur is a sacred and exalted day, entirely elevated above the ordinary weekdays.

Elul, however, contains the opposite wonder. During Elul, we do not have to leave the “field” in order to find the King; **the King comes to us in the field.** We may be standing in the middle of an ordinary weekday—at work, in business, at home, caring for our children, surrounded by our everyday responsibilities and worries—and it is precisely there that Hashem comes out to meet us.

The fact that the days of Elul remain ordinary weekdays is therefore not a deficiency; it is the very greatness of Elul. The revelation is so powerful that Hashem comes down, so to speak, into our ordinary circumstances and gives us the opportunity to draw close to Him right here. The King does not demand that we already be inside the palace before we may approach Him. He comes to meet us exactly where we are, in the middle of our regular lives.

When a Jew truly reflects upon this idea, the entire month of Elul takes on a different meaning. Every morning when he awakens, he can remind himself: **Today, the King is near me.** Today is another precious day when Hashem is especially close. Today I can take one more step.

Today I can open my heart and say, “Ribbono Shel Olam, I want to come closer to You.” There is no need to wait for Rosh Hashanah, and there is no need to wait until one has somehow become “better.” The opportunity is here now. **Now is the time. Now the gates are open. Now the King is showing us a warm and welcoming face.** Every ordinary day of Elul can therefore become a day of extraordinary closeness if we only choose to use it.

But this precious opportunity does not last forever. The King does not remain in the field indefinitely. When Rosh Hashanah arrives, the King returns, so to speak, to His palace, and the entire world once again crowns Him as King. That is why every day of Elul is so precious.

Each passing day carries an opportunity that can never be brought back in quite the same way, and every moment can be used to take another step toward Hashem. Let us therefore not remain standing at a distance. Let us go out to meet the King—with joy, with love, with teshuvah, and with a sincere desire to become closer to Hashem. And when we take even one small step toward Him, He will surely come many steps toward us, receive us **בסבר פנים יפות ובפנים שוחקות**, with warmth and a smiling countenance, and sign us all for **כתיבה וחתימה טובה** and for a good and blessed new year.

Likkutei Torah, Parshas Re'eh, 32a.

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