

Parashat Shoftim, 5773, 2013:

*A Message for the Month of Elul*

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Shifra bat Chaim Alter, and Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam.

The seemingly simple word “*lecha*” (literally, “to you” or “for yourself”) figures prominently in the titles of Parshiot Lech Lecha and Shelach Lecha. In the first instance, Rashi (1040-1105) explains that Hashem used our term in reference to Avram (later, Avraham) leaving his birthplace, to connote the ideas of “for your benefit and for your good.” In the latter case, however, Rashi opines that *lecha* means “according to your [Moshe’s] own understanding,” since Hashem never commanded him to send forth people to scout the Promised Land; instead, Moshe decided to do this based upon his own volition.

The first verse of our *parasha* also contains the word “*lecha*”:

You shall set up judges and law enforcement officials for yourself (*lecha*) in all your cities that the L-rd, your G-d, is giving you, for your tribes, and they shall judge the people [with] righteous judgment. (*Sefer Devarim* 16:18, this and all Bible translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

Unlike the prior two Torah citations, Rashi is silent regarding the term “*lecha*” in our *parasha*. This is particularly fascinating since the phrase “for yourself” seems, at first blush, to be completely superfluous. It, therefore, demands explication since it is a fundamental principle of Torah exegesis that each and every word of the Bible is an integral part of G-d’s message to man. It is to this task that we now turn.

Rabbeinu Behaye ben Asher (mid-13th century – 1340), one of the greatest Sephardic Torah commentators, elucidates the term “*lecha*” in our Torah portion in a novel and captivating manner:

Moshe went the ultimate distance (*masar nafsho*) in guaranteeing the primacy of the Law, therefore, the institution of Judges and the court system is attributed to him. As the Torah states: “... and he [Moshe] saw an Egyptian man striking a Hebrew man of his brothers ... so he struck the Egyptian.” (*Sefer Shemot* 2:11-12) This is the case, as well, regarding the Torah and the Jewish people. Concerning the Torah the text states: “He was there with the L-rd for forty days and forty nights...” (*Sefer Shemot* 34:28) In reference to the Jewish people we find in the context of the Golden Calf: “And now, if You forgive their sin - But if not, erase me now from Your book, which You have written.” (*Sefer Shemot* 32:32) As a result [of Moshe’s boundless self-sacrifice,] all three are eternally connected to him: The Torah is called by his name: “Keep in remembrance the teaching of Moses (*Torat Moshe*), My servant...” (*Sefer Malachi* 3:22) The Jewish people is called by his name: “And the L-rd said to Moses: ‘Go, descend, for your people that you have brought up from the land of Egypt have acted corruptly.’” So, too, the Judges are called after his name. As the Torah states [in our verse]: “for yourself (*lecha*).” (Translation and brackets my own)

In sum, the use of the term “*lecha*,” as found in our verse, is a shorthand reference for the inextricable connection of the Jewish judicial system to Moshe in recognition of his nearly superhuman sacrifice on behalf of the Law.

Some 400 years after Rabbeinu Behaye, the great Chasidic master and preeminent disciple of Rabbi Yisrael Baal Shem Tov, Rabbi Yaakov Yosef HaKohen of Polonne (1710-1784) adopted a very different approach to the word “*lecha*” that appears in our *pasuk* (verse). In his work, *Toldot Yaakov Yosef*, he understood our term in a decidedly homiletical fashion. He used it as an opportunity for enjoining each and every Jew to undergo *cheshbon hanefesh* (introspective analysis), and to try to be completely fair in judging one’s fellow man:

[To what does] “*lecha*” refer [?] – to yourself (*l’atzmecha*). Before anything else, judge yourself, remedy yourself [i.e. your own blunders] first [before you find fault in others.] Moreover, in the same manner that you judge yourself you should judge others. You should not be easy on yourself and tough with your fellow man. Then, too, you should

not rationalize your behaviors while at the same time act with exactitude to a measure of a hairsbreadth with others - and thereby require of your fellow man what you do not demand of yourself. (Translation and brackets my own)

I believe that Rav Yaakov Yosef has provided us with a powerful and persuasive message for the month of Elul. He has taught us to focus upon and address our own shortcomings before we begin to look at the imperfections of others. He has urged us, in a word, to “get our own house in order” before we question the way that other people live their lives. In a Jewish world threatened by the kind of *sinat chinam* (groundless hatred) that destroyed the *Beit HaMikdash* (the Holy Temple), this is an idea that should be publicized, discussed, and analyzed in every shul, beit midrash, yeshiva, and neighborhood. With Hashem’s help, may we listen to this message and become better people than we are today. *V’chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom

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The email list, *b’chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added, please do not hesitate to contact me via email [rdbe718@gmail.com](mailto:rdbe718@gmail.com).

\*\*\* My audio *shiurim* for Women on “*Tefilah: Haskafah and Analysis*,” may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpyd>

\*\*\* I have posted 164 of **Rabbi Soloveitchik’s** English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. They are available here: <http://tinyurl.com/82pgvfn>.

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