

DON'T JUDGE A BOOK BY ITS COVER. IT IS WHAT IS INSIDE THAT COUNTS

PARSHAS SHOFTIM

The Talmud relates an interesting story (Ta'anis 7A-7B and Nedarim 50B). Rabbi Yehoshua ben Chananya was not good looking. The daughter of the Roman emperor said to him, "You are the epitome of magnificent Torah, but it is stored in an ugly vessel". Rabbi Yehoshua ben Chananya responded by asking, "Does your father keep his wine in simple clay vessels? Is there no distinction between the emperor and ordinary people? You should place your wine in vessels of silver and gold." After hearing this, the emperor's daughter had her father's wine placed in vessels of silver and gold. A short time afterwards, the emperor tried drinking the wine, but it had all turned sour. Rabbi Yehoshua ben Chananya wanted to demonstrate that fine material is best preserved in the least of vessels. Rabbi Yehoshua said to her, "The same is also true of the Torah. It spoils if it is contained in a handsome person". She asked him, "But are there not people who are both good looking and learned in Torah?" He replied, "If they were ugly, they would be even more learned."

The **Torah** (Devarim 16:21) prohibits the planting of an *asheirah* (a tree devoted to idolatry) on the Temple Mount, near the mizbayach for Hashem. The **Rambam** (Laws of Avoda Zara 6:9) explains that it was the practice of idolators to plant trees near their altars, to attract attention and encourage people to come and serve the idol. The **Da'as Zekainim** says that the idolators brought sacrifices on their altars in honor of those trees.

The **Ba'al HaTurim** says that the *gematria*, the numerical value, of the word *asheirah* (506) is the same as the value of the phrase, "a judge who is not fitting" [*dayan she'aino hagen*]. That indicates that anyone who appoints a judge who is not fit, is considered as if he planted an *asheirah* tree near the mizbayach. **Rav Chaim Soleveitchik** zt"l quotes the **Talmud** (Sanhedrin 7) citing Raish Lakish who says that whoever appoints a judge who is unworthy, is considered as if he had planted an *asheirah*. What's

*"Do not plant an
Asheirah for yourself
[or] any tree near the
altar of Hashem...."
(Devarim 16:21)*

the comparison? An object that is worshipped as an idol, is evident that it is an idol. It is obvious to any Jew who sees it that it is an idol, and he knows to move far away from it. An *asheirah* is different. To the naked eye, it looks like

any beautiful tree. In reality, the tree is an idol. This is comparable to the appointment of an unworthy man to be a judge. His outward appearance may be regal, befitting a judge. Inwardly, however, he is unfit for the job. He will have a negative impact on truth and justice. (quoted in Ituri Torah by Aharon Yaakov Greenberg).

Similarly, the **Sforno** says that an *asheirah* is something beautiful and decorative. Yet, at the same time it is, in actuality, something ugly from the vantage point of holiness, since it leads to idolatrous practices. When choosing a judge, we should choose one who possesses positive spiritual qualities rather than an unworthy one who only makes a good superficial impression.

According to the **Talmud** (Sanhedrin7A), the appointment of a judge in a Jewish court has major repercussions for all the Jewish People. Any judge who does not render a judgment truthfully, causes the Divine Presence to withdraw from the Jewish People. Conversely, any judge who does render a judgment honestly, causes the Divine Presence to rest among the Jewish People.

Reuven visited older adults in a nursing home. Initially, he felt that these were simply “old” people. When he spoke to them, he realized that they were

much more than that. Many of them had accomplished much in their lives. Some were even heroes. One lady had fought in the Resistance, fighting the Nazis. One man had been a principal of a Jewish school and had encouraged thousands of children to draw closer to Hashem. One man was a firefighter who had saved numerous people from burning buildings. When Reuven left the nursing home, he had an entirely new perspective on life. He understood that just as you can't judge a book by its cover, you can't judge a person by what they look like.

We should not label others and judge them by the way that they look. There can be great people, righteous people, and accomplished people sitting right next to us, unbeknown to us. There can be people who maintained faith in Hashem through difficult challenges, thus making them very special people. There can be someone who merely did one good deed; yet that deed was very precious to Hashem. We are incapable of “rating” others, as only Hashem knows one's abilities and what he is capable of. We should not be arrogant. The person upon whom we are looking down, may actually have a greater portion in the World to Come than we have. We must have respect for all people. Our mutual respect for one-another will foster feelings of love and respect. May these actions help speed the coming of Moshiach.

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