

PARASHAS SHOFTIM

Doctors and Pilots

Seeing is believing. Most of us are natural skeptics, and it is difficult to convince us of something we have not seen with our own eyes. And even then, we are apt to have lingering doubts. Indeed, we take pride in our skepticism, because we know it protects us from all sorts of fraud and deception. We are nobody's fools.

In this week's portion, however, the Torah goes directly against this tendency. The Torah exhorts us not to deviate one whit from the words of our Sages, neither to the right nor to the left. What does this mean? The Talmud explains that even if they tell us that our right hand is our left and our left is our right we are to follow them with implicit faith. Of course, our Sages would obviously never tell us something that is patently ridiculous. Rather, the left and right hands are a metaphor for something that is seemingly erroneous according to our perceptions. Nonetheless, we are required to follow their lead rather than our own judgment. The Torah demands that we have faith.

How do we understand this requirement to have faith? Why does the Torah demand of us to go against our natural instincts? Why should we follow blindly rather than take a stand as independent thinkers and demand explanations?

If we pause to consider, however, we will discover that faith forms an integral part of our everyday lives. In fact, without faith we would be practically immobilized. When we get into our cars, we do not worry that our brakes may be defective and will suddenly fail when we are traveling at high speeds. Why? Because we have faith in the manufacturers. When we get on a plane we do not worry that the pilot is incompetent or drunk. Why? Because we have faith in the pilot. When we go to doctors, we generally accept what they tell us. Why? Because we have faith in our doctors.

Without faith, we would be afraid to switch on the lights or put food into our mouths or believe a word anyone tells us. Clearly, Hashem created us with the innate ability to have faith. Why then, if we so easily have faith in our doctors and pilots, do we find it so difficult to have faith in Hashem even when we believe in His existence? Why do we find it so hard to accept all His deeds and commands without question?

The answer lies in our egotism. Doctors and pilots are there to serve us. Accepting them on good faith may result in physical restrictions, but it does not require us to surrender our personal

independence in any way. We are still in control of our destinies. They advise. We make the decisions. Such faith comes easily.

Faith in Hashem is an altogether different matter. If we forfeit the right to question His deeds and commands, we acknowledge that we are subservient to Him. We surrender our independence, and that is a very difficult thing to do. But still, we must. For if we believe in Hashem yet refuse to give Him our faith and trust, we would be living a lie.

Therefore, the Torah exhorts us again and again to have faith in Hashem, to overcome the stiff, illogical resistance of egotism and submit to His higher intelligence. Certainly, He is at least as deserving of our good faith as our doctors and pilots.

After attending the yeshivah of a great sage for a number of years, a young student suddenly declared himself an atheist and announced that he was leaving. Naturally, this came as great shock to the other students and the faculty, and they begged him to consult the sage before he left.

The sage nodded gravely as he listened to the young man.

"I agree that if you are an atheist this is not the place for you," he said. "But tell me, what made you become an atheist?"

"It is because I have lost my faith," the young man replied.

"Indeed? And why did you lose your faith?"

"Because I have questions."

The sage smiled sadly. "No, my young friend, you do not have questions. You have answers. You have decided that you want to live a certain lifestyle, and in order to do so you have to be an atheist. Now that you've come up with this answer, you have found questions to support your foregone conclusion."

In our own lives, we experience the egotistical resistance to faith in our children, who find it hard to admit that their parents may be right but would willingly accept the same statements from others. The difference is simple. When we acknowledge the wisdom of parents, we pay a high price in personal independence. Similarly, we pay a high price when we acknowledge the awesome might and wisdom of the Master of the Universe. But if we overcome our stubborn egotism and acknowledge the obvious truth, we will find that the rewards of faith are well worth the price we pay for them.