



TIMELESS∞TORAH

Summer Reflections

SHOFTIM: LOOKING BACK TO MOVE FORWARD

As the days of August pass by, there is a growing sense that a season of new beginnings is drawing near. Even for those long since finished with school, this time of year carries a quiet encouragement to pause and reflect. The summer months begin to wind down, familiar routines prepare to return and our thoughts naturally turn towards the months ahead. It is therefore fitting that the month of Elul arrives at precisely this moment in the calendar, offering us an opportunity to prepare, reflect and begin again.

Behavioural scientists have even given this tendency a name. In an innovative 2014 study, Hengchen Dai, Katherine Milkman and Jason Riis described what they called the 'fresh start effect'. They found that temporal landmarks - such as the beginning of a new week, a birthday or the start of a new academic year - can create a psychological sense of a new beginning, making people more motivated to pursue goals they might previously have neglected.

There is real wisdom in this observation. Yet the Torah offers a different perspective. Growth does not begin by forgetting the past. Instead, it asks us to look back in a way that gives us the confidence to move forwards.

Towards the end of Parshat Shoftim, the Torah turns to the careful preparations for war. The soldiers are assembled, those who are exempt are released from service, and then, just before battle begins, the Kohen addresses the people: *'Hear, O Israel, today you are drawing near to battle against your enemies. Do not let your hearts grow faint. Do not be afraid.'* (Devarim 20:3).

The Ramban (d. 1270) notes that this address is a unique mitzvah, delivered specifically at the moment the Jewish people are about to enter battle. Until now, all the preparations have been practical. Suddenly, the Torah pauses to prepare the soldiers emotionally and spiritually as well. Before they face their enemies, they must first strengthen their hearts.

The Ohr HaChaim (d. 1743) sees something deeper here. He suggests that this entire section is also a *remez*, an allusion to another battle altogether: the lifelong struggle each of us wages against the *yetzer hara* (negative inclination). Every day presents choices about honesty, patience, kindness and self-discipline. Some days we emerge victorious; on others we fall short. Viewed this way, the battlefield described by the Torah is more than a physical one. It is also the inner landscape of Jewish life.

Taking this idea a step further, one phrase appears to stand out here: *'Al yerach levavchem* - Do not let your hearts grow faint.' This is an unusual command. The Torah does not promise that the battle will be easy, nor does it suggest that victory is guaranteed. Instead, it focuses on something more fundamental. Whatever happens, do not lose heart.

How does someone continue striving after disappointment? How do we approach another Elul with enthusiasm when we know how many resolutions have faded during previous years? Perhaps the answer lies in a small detail that is easy to overlook. The Torah introduces this section with the word *vehaya*: *'Vehaya ki tetzei lamilchamah...it shall be when you go out to war.'* Yet the



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Sages observe that *vayehi* is often associated with sorrow or difficulty, whereas *vehaya* is associated with joy (Bereshit Rabba 42:2). This seems surprising. If ever there were a context for *vayehi* not *vehaya*, surely it would be the prospect of going to war.

Rabbi Shlomo Alkabetz (d. 1584), best known as the author of *Lecha Dodi*, offers a beautiful way of understanding the distinction. *Vayehi*, he explains, begins as a future-tense verb but is transformed into the past. It reflects a person who looks ahead because they feel they have little to draw upon from yesterday. The future becomes an attempt to rewrite an unsatisfying past. It is an outlook shaped by regret.

Vehaya, by contrast, begins in the past and is transformed into the future. It reflects someone who looks back and sees signs of growth, moments of courage and quiet achievements that can become the foundation for tomorrow. They know they still have further to travel, but they also know they have already come some way. Their past becomes a source of confidence rather than discouragement.

Seen in this light, the Torah's choice of *vehaya* becomes significant. Before the soldiers step onto the battlefield, they are reminded that they carry with them everything they have learnt, endured and achieved until now. Their past is not a burden to overcome. It is the very thing that prepares them for the challenges ahead.

This is where the message of *Shoftim* meets the spiritual atmosphere of Elul. If every inner battle is approached not by erasing the past but by drawing strength from it,

then the new beginning of this season is not a break from who we have been, but a continuation of everything we have already become.

Throughout Elul, we add the Tehillim of *L'David Hashem Ori* (chapter 27) Twice the psalm tells us: '*Kaveh el Hashem; chazak v'ya'amez libecha; v'kaveh el Hashem - Hope in Hashem; be strong and let your heart take courage; and hope in Hashem.*' Hope is repeated because spiritual growth is rarely achieved in a single moment. It is built through perseverance. The heart that refuses to give up eventually discovers strengths it never knew it possessed.

As another Elul approaches, the Torah offers us a choice. We can look back with frustration, seeing only missed opportunities, or we can look back with honesty and gratitude, recognising how much we have already grown. That is the perspective of *vehaya*. Yesterday is not something to escape from; it is the foundation on which tomorrow is built.

The battle is real, but so is the strength we have already acquired. *Al yerach levavchem - do not let your heart grow faint.* The confidence to face the future begins with recognising the fact that we have already come further than we imagine.

The weekly Timeless Torah Parsha Shiur resumes in person after the summer break on 26th August