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The Torah Reading called Shoftim begins with the words "Judges and police you shall appoint at all of your gates" (Deut. 16:18). Rashi explains that "all of your gates" refer to every city and community.

The Talmud (Nedarim 32) describes the body as a 'small city.' The holy book, Tanya, expands the metaphor with a striking image: a 'city' in which the opposing forces of good and evil are locked in a struggle for control. To help bring the forces of good to victory, each of us has to act as both 'judge' and 'policeman.' As judge, we must determine if a certain desired behavior is correct according to Jewish law, and try to act accordingly. If our natural inclination does not wish to obey, we must act as a police officer and force it to comply. "All of your gates" implies that we must guard not only against deeds forbidden by Torah, but also against permissible actions that might be indulged to excess.

We live in exciting times. The whole world can be considered a 'global village', and society is being tested constantly by the fall of traditional social and moral boundaries. As a result, now more than ever, every 'city' needs a gateway. A gate functions as both an entrance and exit, and, if necessary, can be closed, stopping unwanted traffic. We too, when we feel inclined to think positively, speak kindly or act constructively, we should open our 'gates' wide. But when the impulse to think, speak, or act negatively approaches, we must slam the gates shut.

What are our 'gates'? These are our eyes, which read Torah and absorb its wisdom and values; our ears, which listen to our teachers; our noses, which inhale a pure and holy atmosphere, infused with quality Judaism; and our mouths, which act as an entry for kosher food only and as an exit for kosher words.

The verse speaks about appointing judges and police. The judge that decides when to open and close the gate is the intellect. The police that maintain order is the willpower to fulfill the judge's decision. An example of the process is eating. First, we must decide if the food is kosher. Even if it is, we must consider other factors: 'Am I allowed to eat dairy now, or did I just eat meat?' 'Do I really need to eat this?' etc. Even after we decide that it is permissible, we still must decide what blessing to make. The ability to choose when and how the 'gate' is opened was bestowed upon us by the Almighty; it is up to us to guide our souls and bodies in the right way.

In Kabbalah, "gates" can also refer to the "50 gates of understanding," which allow the mind's comprehension to connect to and affect the heart's emotions. These 50 gates in holiness are opposed by the 50 gates of the "other side." Among the tasks of our inner 'judge' is to accurately identify whether his desire derives from his positive or negative aspect.

Shoftim is always read at the beginning of the month of Elul. Elul, in turn, is the gateway to the month of Tishrei, the month of the High Holidays when we are judged for our actions of last year, and are awarded what we will receive in the coming year. How we use our time in Elul affects how much our prayers will be accepted on Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur. Just as using our intellect and willpower now will have wide-ranging repercussions in the immediate future, so also our efforts will succeed in bringing about the true and complete redemption through our righteous Mashiach. (An essay from Rabbi Shaul Yosef Leiter, www.ascent.org.il)

"Is the tree of the field a man that it should enter the siege before you?" (20:19) QUESTION: The Gemara (Ta'anit 7a) interprets the words "ha'adam eitz hasadeh" literally - "man is the tree of the field" - actually comparing people to trees, and learns that just as one is careful with the fruit one eats, one should be careful from whom one learns Torah.

What lesson can man derive from the tree? ANSWER: Unlike all other plants, which wither after their season, the tree weathers the storm, remaining in existence throughout all seasons and for many years. The tree derives its uniqueness from its root system: the stronger the roots, the healthier the tree.

The roots of the Jew are his faith in Hashem and attachment to authentic Torah teachings, as conveyed to us by our forefathers, the patriarchs Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov. Every Jew is exposed to many different "seasons" during his lifetime. Unfortunately some succumb to temptation and forfeit their affiliation with Hashem and Torah. Contingent on how strong a Jew is "rooted" is his ability to be a staunch Torah-observant Jew throughout his entire lifetime. (From: Vedibarta Bam by Rabbi Moshe Bogomilsky)

Elul

The Rebbe writes: ... I also take this opportunity, as we have entered the month of Elul, to remind you of the special significance of the month, the Month of Divine Grace in preparation for Rosh Hashonoh and for the entire coming year, may it be a good one for all of us.

The Alter Rebbe [Rabbi Shneur Zalman, founder of Chabad Chasidut] explains the special significance of this month by means of the well-known parable of a "King in the field,"

"When a King approaches the city of his royal residence the people of the city go out to welcome the king in the field. Then everyone who wishes is permitted to come and greet the king and he receives everybody graciously and with a smiling face. But after he enters his Royal Palace special permission is required to see the king and this also is the privilege of a chosen few."

This, then, is the significance of the whole month of Elul, when the King of Kings, the Holy One Blessed be He, makes known that He is "in the field" and everyone - man, woman, boy and girl can come to Him without difficulties, or special introductions.

But - one may ask - what is the meaning of approaching the King in the field, since G-d has no likeness of a body, nor a body and as the Torah warns; "You have not seen any image (of G-d)?"

Therefore the Alter Rebbe goes on to explain that this approach has to do with prayer, for prayer in general and in the days of Elul in particular is an occasion concerning which is written, "May G-d cause His face to shine upon thee" - face to face - the person praying standing directly in the presence of the King, as in the parable above.

And the Alter Rebbe adds, that in order that such closeness be truly meaningful in a lasting and tangible way, it must be followed by actual study of Torah, by Tzedoko and Good Deeds.

May G-d grant that each and every one of you should go from strength to strength in all matters of Goodness and Holiness, Torah and Mitzvos, and be a source of pride and true Nachas [pleasure] to your parents and teachers, and may you make fullest use of the auspicious days of this month and be inscribed for a good and sweet year materially and spiritually.

With the blessing of kesivo vechasima tovah [written and sealed for good]. (FREE RENDITION, In the Month of Elul, Chodesh Horachamim, 5733, [Month of Mercy, 1973], L'Chaim 5759 #581)

THE TZEMACH TZEDEK RELATED: THE BAAL SHEM TOV WAS VERY FOND OF LIGHT, AND SAID, "OR (' LIGHT') IS THE NUMERICAL EQUIVALENT OF RAZ (' SECRET'). WHOEVER KNOWS THE 'SECRET' CONTAINED IN EVERY THING CAN BRING ILLUMINATION. (FROM REBBE'S HAYOM YOM, ELUL 6)

A Jew must have in his own personal life both "judges" and "officers" - "judges" to decide on the proper mode of behavior to follow, and "officers" to ensure that the decision is acted upon. - The Rebbe