

They shall judge the people with righteous judgment. (16:18)

The simple meaning of this command is that the judges who are appointed to adjudicate various disputes should do so with integrity and righteousness, acting with impartiality in maintaining a system of justice that is above reproach. The *Midrash Tanchuma* adds that the appointed judges were to intercede before Hashem on behalf of the Jewish People and find merit for them. While this is certainly a noble calling, the choice that the *Midrash* presents as an example of a leader who exemplifies the trait of seeking merit in behalf of *Klal Yisrael* is enigmatic. The fifth *Shofet*, judge of the Jewish People, following the *petirah*, passing, of Yehoshua bin Nun was Gideon. He led *Klal Yisrael* for forty years. Apparently, he was quite good, having lasted that long. The problem is understanding what about his actions earned him such accolades.

The *Navi* teaches that the Jewish People had fallen into the labyrinth of sin. Hashem punished them with seven years of domination by the evil *Midyanim* who destroyed them materially, bringing the nation to its knees in a state of hunger and poverty. The suffering they experienced had the desired outcome, in that the nation slowly put an end to their downward spiral and repented. Until that time, Gideon was a virtual unknown who commanded little respect. Hashem dispatched a Heavenly angel to appoint him as leader of the nation, to guide them back on their path of return. Gideon's response to the angel is incredulous: "If Hashem is with us, why has all this happened to us? And where are all His wonders of which our forefathers told us, 'Behold Hashem brought us out of Egypt'? For now Hashem has deserted us and He has delivered us into the control of Midyan." (*Shoftim* 6:13)

Rashi explains Gideon's reply to the angel. Apparently the angel appeared on *Pesach*, which prompted Gideon to say, "Yesterday, my father recited *Hallel* and he read to me how Hashem had taken the Jewish People out of Egypt, but now, Hashem has forsaken us! If our forefathers were righteous, Hashem should spare us in their merit. If they were not deserving, then we should be no worse than they. If He redeemed them despite their lack of *zechuyos*, merits, we should be no different." The angel wished him well, telling him that in the merit of his having defended the Jewish People, he was chosen to lead them against the *Midyanim*.

Upon perusal of Gideon's reply to the angel, one is taken aback with his almost heretical response: Why did Hashem forsake His People, failing to protect them from their enemies? In the book, *A Shabbos Vort*, by Rabbi Sholom Smith, the author quotes *Horav Avraham Pam, zl*, who observes that it was precisely this advocacy on behalf of the nation that catapulted Gideon to become the nation's leader. Advocacy does not cover up the truth, painting a picture of righteousness over festering evil. Gideon told the truth. The people had sinned; while they might thus be unworthy of being spared from punishment, were they any different than their ancestors? If the earlier generation was saved, so should Gideon's generation. Hashem replied that it was this truth that He was waiting to hear. These words would ultimately vindicate the Jewish People. Cover-ups do not work. The best defense is the truth.

Gideon's defense of the Jewish People serves as the standard for how we should attempt to speak favorably of people. It is easy to find fault concerning anyone – as long as one looks hard enough. That same effort could be expended to seek the positive, to emphasize a reason to justify an individual's behavior. Criticizing a fellow Jew, finding fault in his shortcomings, will not do much for the subject and will only serve to distance one from Hashem. The Almighty wants to hear "good" about His children. When we knock other Jews, we are not causing much satisfaction for Hashem. No father wants to hear that his child is a problem. Advocacy on behalf of our brethren will help them and earns us "points" when it comes our time to be judged.

Horav Levi Yitzchak, zl, m'Berditchev was considered the consummate advocate on behalf of the Jewish People. He would find something positive in the most negative of behaviors. His love for Hashem's children was boundless, as evinced by his comment, "The mouth was created for two purposes – to speak words of Torah and to find merit in the Jewish People." Undoubtedly, there are "difficult" Jews who by their actions and personal demeanor alienated themselves from the community. Their behavior stymies us. They, too, deserve a chance. Everyone has a story, a pathology which sheds light on his individual behavior. A great *tzaddik*, righteous person, whose name eludes me, once said, "As one goes out of his way to *far'enfer*, explain a *shverer*/difficult *Tosfos*, so, too, should he attempt to *far'enfer*/justify a *shverer Yid*."