Shoftim: Valuing every human being

by Rabbi Dr Jeffrey Cohen

This week's sidrah speaks of the equality of all men, and the necessity to administer justice and charitableness to all without a trace of partiality. Remarkably, even of the king it states, לבלתי רום לבבו מאחיו, 'that his heart be not exalted over his brethren' (Deut. 17:20).

Equality and accountability go hand-in-hand, and the Torah therefore demands the latter on the part of all, especially of our national and civic leaders; and hence the reference to a situation where a body is discovered murdered in the open countryside. The Torah demands that the elders and leaders of the nearest town make a solemn declaration that they had not been involved in the person's murder and could not have prevented it. The Talmudic rabbis query this law and observe how inconceivable it is that anyone could even imagine that the elders of a Jewish town might be involved in murder! So why then were they called upon to issue such a denial? The answer they give is that this is essentially an acknowledgment by the elders that the slain man was not some stranger who had passed through their town, and was left without hospitality, food and shelter, to the extent that he felt constrained to move on without those provisions or advice as to which routes to avoid because of lurking dangers.

The corollary of this is that we are all responsible for each other, and that governments and community leaders have a particular responsibility to secure the safety and protection of their citizens. During this Corona epidemic we continue to hear reports from many

countries of allegations that their leaders were remiss in not having put in place adequate safeguards to protect the nation.

In Talmudic times there was a system of local government led by a representative group whose members were referred to as *shiv'at tovei ha'iyr*, 'The [Council of] Seven Worthies of the City' (See Tal. *Meg*. 26b). All their meetings were held in public to ensure accountability (See Karo, *Bet Yosef*, sec.153), and the absolute integrity demanded of its members is reflected in the designation *tovei ha'iyr* accorded to them.

One of Judaism's cardinal ethical and halakhic principles is *Kol yisrael areivin zeh lazeh*, 'everyone bears responsibility for his neighbor,' a principle that primarily meant that one must strive to help another to achieve moral and religious fulfilment, but which was broadened to include responsibility for his or her safety and well-being.

Indeed, that may be construed as the very first ethical teaching in the Torah, as inferred from Cain's pathetic attempt to exonerate himself for the murder of his brother. When challenged by God, 'Where is Abel, your brother?', Cain replies, erroneously and insolently, **לא ידעתי**, **השומר אחי אנכי** , 'I don't know. Am I my brother's keeper?' God did not choose to dignify his naïve query with the obviously answer, 'Yes, you certainly are!'

In the words of Chief Rabbi J. H. Hertz, 'Only a murderer altogether renounces the obligations of brotherhood' (See his note on Gen. 4:9).

To return to our opening reference to the status of the king. Royalty may enjoy privilege, but their lives are no more precious or sacred in the eyes of God than the lowliest in

society. Perhaps that is why the Torah made the appointment of a king a concession to the wishes of the nation, not a requirement. Hence, when the people petitioned the prophet Samuel to appoint a king over Israel so that their own status might be enhanced, and so become like all the other nations,' his instinctive response was that their request was an affront to God. The truth of this was confirmed by God's instruction to Samuel, 'Listen to the demand of the people…for it is not you that they have rejected; it is Me that they have rejected as their king' (I Sam. 8:7).

Often it is the ordinary folk around us who enrich our lives far more than the so-called rich and famous, and this was illustrated by a piece that I read some time ago, written by the cartoonist Charles Schultz, creator of the "Peanuts" comic strip. He made his point by asking a seminar group of older people to write down their answers to a series of questions, such as: name six people who have won either the Nobel or Pulitzer prizes; name the current wealthiest man in the world; name last year's Academy Award winner for best actor; name the previous year's winner of the US Open golf competition; name the winner of last year's Women's Wimbledon.

Most of the answers collected in were most unimpressive. In truth, we hardly remember the headline-makers of yesterday, however talented or well-publicized they may have been at the time. Once the applause dies down, and their places begin to be filled by other, equally, or even more, talented people, their achievements are generally forgotten, or at least placed into a less idealized place in our minds.

Schultz then asked them to respond in writing to another quiz, wherein he asked such questions as, name two teachers who made the greatest impression on you throughout your

school years; name two friends who helped you through a difficult period or crisis in your youth; name a Senior School mate whom you particularly admired; Name a club leader who instilled confidence in you and/or enabled you to realize your inner potential in some direction; name someone who became a role model for you in your early professional or business life, opening your eyes to ways of doing things that greatly improved your own performance.

To the latter questions most of the audience was able to respond readily and fully. The lesson was clearly that the people who make a difference in your life are not the most famous, those with the most money or the most awards. They are the ones who care, who relate to others warmly and at the personal level, who recognize potential in others and are eager to nurture it, who view others not as competitors but as fellow workers whose contribution will improve the collective well-being.

On the day I was writing this week's Shoftim thought (It was actually three weeks ago, on the 28th July 2020. You've obviously heard about the early bird! Well, after all, my Hebrew name is Yonah, 'a dove!'), the BBC provided a classical example of the point that Charles Schultz was making. On the lunchtime TV News, they showed the bowler, Stuart Broad, gaining his 500th wicket in Test Cricket. In the same clip they also showed him accompanied by his coach from his schoolboy days, a Mr David Steele, now in his seventies, to whom Broad continues to attribute his passion for the game and the implanting within him of the skills that went on to make him a cricketing superstar. Not only did Broad never forget him, but his gratitude towards him never waned.

The Hebrew term for valuing those who value us is *hakarat ha-tov*, literally 'acknowledging kindnesses.' It is also one of the main reasons why we pray, namely in order to render thanks and gratitude to God for all the benefits that we enjoy and the kindnesses we receive at His hands: primarily that of life itself and its manifold opportunities and pleasures.

If the Covid-19 experience has been in any respect positive, it was in the way society came to recognize the worth, and demonstrate its appreciation, of the National Health Service and the nation's care workers and professionals, a boon that most of us had taken for granted in our daily lives. If it has made our society a little more sensitive to the importance of *hakarat ha-tov*, that is truly something positive!
