

Torah Stories for the Table

Three source-based stories for Parshas Shoftim

STORY 1

The Basket He Wouldn't Accept

וְלֹא־תִקַּח שֹׁחַד כִּי הַשֹּׁחַד יְעוֹר עֵינֵי חֲכָמִים וְיִסְלַף דְּבָרֵי צְדִיקִים

“Do not accept a bribe, for a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and distorts the words of the righteous.”

SOURCE: Devarim 16:19

Every Erev Shabbos, the sharecropper who worked Rabbi Yishmael b'Rebbi Yosi's land would bring him a basket of fruit. One week, however, the man arrived a day early — on Thursday.

Rabbi Yishmael noticed the change and asked why he had come early. The sharecropper explained that he had a case to be judged that day. Since he was coming to Beis Din anyway, he thought he would bring Rabbi Yishmael the usual basket along the way.

Rabbi Yishmael refused to accept the fruit. He also told the man that he could not judge his case. Instead, he arranged for two other Torah scholars to hear it.

As the case was being judged, Rabbi Yishmael found something disturbing happening inside his own mind. He kept thinking of arguments the sharecropper might make: perhaps he could claim this; perhaps he could answer that. Without deciding to favor the man, Rabbi Yishmael could feel himself searching for ways that the sharecropper might win.

That realization shook him. He had not accepted the basket at all. And even if he had accepted it, the fruit was not an ordinary bribe — as the owner of the field, the produce was rightfully his share. Yet merely having the fruit brought early, in connection with the court case, had already affected the way he was thinking.

Rabbi Yishmael saw from his own reaction how powerful bribery can be. If a person can become biased even without accepting anything that does not belong to him, how much more careful must a judge be when an actual gift or favor is involved.

FOR THE TABLE: Why do you think Rabbi Yishmael disqualified himself even though he never accepted the basket?

STORY SOURCE: Gemara Kesubos 105b

Want more amazing Divrei Torah for your Shabbos table?

Torah for the Table · TorahForTheTable.com · Updated every Thursday

STORY 2

When the King Came to Court

לְבִלְתִּי רוּם-לִבּוֹ מֵאֶחָיו

“So that his heart should not be raised above his brothers.”

SOURCE: Devarim 17:20

A servant of King Yannai killed a person. Shimon ben Shetach told the Sages that the case had to be judged. The court sent word to the king, and Yannai sent his servant to appear before them.

The judges then sent another message: Yannai himself had to come as well. The Torah teaches that when a case involves an owner’s ox that killed a person, the owner must stand with his ox. So the king came to Beis Din.

Yannai sat down. Shimon ben Shetach told him to stand so that the witnesses could testify. He added that the king was not standing out of respect for the judges. He was standing before Hashem, as the Torah says that the two parties to a dispute stand before Hashem and before the judges (Devarim 19:17).

King Yannai answered that he would not stand merely because Shimon ben Shetach ordered him to. He would stand only if the other judges agreed.

Shimon ben Shetach turned to the judges on his right. They lowered their faces to the ground and said nothing. He turned to the judges on his left. They too lowered their faces. They were afraid to confront the king.

Shimon ben Shetach rebuked them for refusing to say what they believed. The Gemara relates that the judges were immediately punished and died. After this frightening incident, the Sages enacted that a king of Israel would not judge and would not be judged, and would not testify or have testimony given concerning him. The commentators explain that this was because of the danger involved.

One judge had been willing to say what the law required even in front of a king. The others knew the case was before them, but fear kept them silent.

FOR THE TABLE: What made Shimon ben Shetach able to speak when the other judges could not?

STORY SOURCE: Gemara Sanhedrin 19a–19b

Want more amazing Divrei Torah for your Shabbos table?

Torah for the Table · TorahForTheTable.com · Updated every Thursday

STORY 3

The Navi Who Wouldn't Change the Message

וְנִתַּתִּי דְבָרִי בְּפִיו וְדִבֶּר אֲלֵיהֶם אֶת כָּל־אֲשֶׁר אֶצְוֶנוּ

"I will place My words in his mouth, and he will speak to them everything that I command him."

SOURCE: Devarim 18:18

King Achav of Israel was considering going to war. King Yehoshafat of Yehudah asked that they first seek the word of Hashem. Four hundred prophets spoke favorably about the battle, but Yehoshafat asked whether there was still a prophet of Hashem whom they could consult.

Achav said there was one more: Michayahu ben Yimlah. Achav did not like him, because Michayahu did not prophesy good for him, but bad.

A messenger was sent to bring Michayahu. On the way, the messenger warned him that the other prophets were all giving the king the same favorable message. He urged Michayahu to speak like them and say something good as well.

Michayahu refused to shape his prophecy to please the king. He declared that whatever Hashem told him, that was what he would speak.

When Michayahu stood before Achav, he first echoed the other prophets and told the king to go up and succeed. Achav heard the mockery in it and pressed him to speak nothing but the truth in Hashem's name. Michayahu then delivered the warning Achav did not want to hear. He described a prophetic vision showing that the king would be drawn into the battle and fall there.

Tzidkiyahu ben Kena'anah, one of the prophets who had spoken favorably, stepped forward and struck Michayahu on the cheek. Achav then ordered that Michayahu be taken to prison and given only meager bread and water until the king returned safely.

Michayahu did not take back his words. He answered that if Achav truly returned in peace, then Hashem had not spoken through him. Achav went to battle. He was struck there and died, just as Michayahu's warning had foretold.

Michayahu stood alone against the message everyone else wanted the king to hear. Pressure from the crowd, a blow to the face, and the threat of prison did not change the message he had been given to deliver.

FOR THE TABLE: Why is it especially difficult to tell the truth when everyone around you is saying the opposite?

STORY SOURCE: Melachim I 22:1-38

Want more amazing Divrei Torah for your Shabbos table?

Torah for the Table · TorahForTheTable.com · Updated every Thursday