



THE SHALOM BAYIT JOURNAL



Parashat Shoftim

Leadership and Influence

Understanding the Torah and the Human Experience

The field of psychology has a long history of studying authority and leadership and the effects it can have on people. In 1963, social psychologist Stanley Milgram conducted his well-known research on obedience, showing how strongly people could be influenced by an authority figure.

In the wake of Nazi Germany, Milgram sought to understand how good people could be so obedient to evil. He set up a simulated shock laboratory in which participants were instructed to administer increasingly severe electrical shocks to an actor.

The results revealed that 65% of participants continued to the maximum shock level when instructed to do so while they believed their actions were causing harm to another person.

The study revealed how difficult it can be to go against an established authority figure.

More recent leadership research shows that the values and behaviors of a leader can gradually shape how the people around them perform and behave.

In 2009, organizational psychologist David Mayer and his colleagues tested what they called a “trickle-down” model of ethical leadership.

They examined whether the values modeled by leaders at the top of an organization would make their way down through supervisors and eventually affect employees.

Their findings showed that when higher-level leaders demonstrated stronger ethical leadership, supervisors beneath them were more likely to demonstrate similar leadership habits.

The groups also showed less harmful behavior and more cooperative behavior, suggesting that the influence of good leadership had spread downward through the group.

A good leader can bring out something good in the people around them, while a leader with the wrong values can pull those same people in the opposite direction.





THE SHALOM BAYIT JOURNAL



Parashat Shoftim

Parashat Shoftim begins by turning our attention toward the leadership of the Jewish people. The parashah discusses judges, officers, kings, kohanim, and prophets, placing a strong focus on the people who will guide the nation.

The Sforno explains:

אחר המצות לההמון צוה עניני מנהיגיו והם המלכים והשופטים והכהנים והנביאים אשר בתקונם יתוקן ענין ההמון ובקלקולם יקולקל

"After giving the commandments to the people, the Torah turns to the matters of their leaders, the kings, judges, kohanim, and prophets, because when they are upright, the people will be upright, and when they are corrupted, the people will be corrupted."

Leaders help shape what a community comes to see as normal and acceptable. Over time, their ideas and values can begin to affect those around them. When leaders are upright, that uprightness can spread. When they are corrupt, that corruption can spread as well.

Psychology has more recently studied and documented just how much influence leaders can have on the people around them.

That influence can lead people toward harmful choices because of a reluctance to disobey an authority figure, or it can move in a positive direction as values and behaviors gradually trickle down through a group.

The Torah has long recognized this part of human behavior. Perhaps that is why Parashat Shoftim places such importance on who leads the Jewish people and how they lead.

שֹׁפְטִים וְשֹׁטְרִים תִּתֵּן לָךְ בְּכָל־שְׁעָרֶיךָ אֲשֶׁר יְהוָה יְהוֹדֶה לָּךְ נָתַן לְךָ לְשֹׁבְטֶיךָ וְלְשֹׁפְטֶיךָ אֶת־הָעָם מִשְׁפָּט־צֶדֶק

"Judges and officers you shall appoint for yourself in all your gates, which Hashem your God gives you, for your tribes, and they shall judge the people with righteous judgment."

(Devarim 16:18)



About The Shalom Bayit Journal

The Shalom Bayit Journal explores the intersection of Torah, psychology, relationships, and the human experience. Through thoughtful essays and practical reflection, the Journal seeks to make timeless wisdom meaningful and accessible for everyday life.

