

## DIVINE LAPSE OF JUDGMENT?

### A Devotional Meditation on on Shoftim (Judges)

Deuteronomy 16:18-21:9; Isaiah 51:12-53:12; Genesis 1:28, 2:18-4:16;  
Matthew 7:1-5; John 7:24; Acts 3:23-26; Romans 2:1-4; 1 Corinthians 6:1-8, 11:17-34

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Grimes County Courthouse, Anderson, Texas. Photo by Patrick Feller, March 9 2018, [via Flickr](#).

Did our Creator set up the human race for failure?

When He made the First Man, the Creator said, "It is not good for the man to be alone. Let Me make a well-matched helper for him." (Genesis 2:18). One reason He said this is because we humans lapse into self-destructive thoughts and behaviors if deprived of contact with other people. Another reason is that no man or woman can bring new life into the world by themselves. Unless they come together, with all their Divinely engineered biological differences, they cannot fulfill the first

commandment about being fruitful and multiplying.

That's where the set-up for failure happened. If human beings get into trouble all by themselves, then putting two or more of us together makes matters worse. As soon as the First Woman and First Man met and established the first society, they began wrestling with two different perceptions of themselves, their environment, the Creator, and their reason for existence. Perhaps their differences of outlook caused them to argue and be angry even before they ate from the tree the Creator reserved for Himself. Even in the beauty of Eden, miscommunication and misunderstanding about God's instructions, and most likely misperception of each other's motives, contributed to their decisions to do what God said not to do. The resulting shame, fear, pride, anger, and other emotions combined to cause our first ancestors to turn on each other, on their environment, on their Maker, and on themselves. (Self-loathing, after all, is not a post-modern phenomenon.)

That's how bad things got when human society consisted of only two people. When there were four people, it became lethal, because the miscommunication and misperception sprang from jealousy, which had roots in shame, fear, pride, and anger. That's why the Second Man, Cain, murdered the Third Man, Abel. He did that even though the Creator confronted him with the need to judge himself and take control of his thoughts and emotions before they took control of him.

Centuries later, when society consisted of multiple nations and multitudes of people, the problems had grown exponentially, and the Creator had to intervene so humanity wouldn't eradicate themselves completely. Then He intervened again to create a nation that would serve as His standard bearer to the whole world. Not only did He give them instructions about how human beings should relate to one another, He gave them authority to act on those instructions so their society could be His witnesses in the earth. That's why Moses included this important point in what became known as the Torah:

Judges and officers you are to appoint within all your gates that *ADONAI* your God is giving you, according to your tribes; and they are to judge the people with righteous judgment. You are not to twist justice—you must not show partiality or take a bribe, for a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and distorts the words of the righteous. Justice, justice you must pursue, so that you may live and possess the land that *ADONAI* your God is giving you.

Deuteronomy 16:18-20 TLV

Israel's officers and judges didn't remain faithful to their calling. Centuries of judicial corruption led the people to demand a king to oversee the nation, defend the borders, and honor justice in truth rather than in the breach. Moses covered that eventuality in the Torah, giving instructions for how the kings of Israel were to conduct themselves. Yet the kings did exactly the opposite: they took multiple wives, they forged alliances with Egypt, they governed in the tyrannical model of the Pharaohs rather than the just, compassionate, and merciful model of the Almighty, and they made themselves rich on the backs of their people.

God knew that would happen. That's why He promised to send Israel another Prophet like Moses, whom they would have to obey. That would be the Messiah, the Prophet-Priest-King of Israel and Judge of the nations. The men and women who followed Yeshua of Nazareth were convinced that He was that Prophet. They maintained that testimony even in the face of censorship, excommunication, economic distress, criminal prosecution, mob violence, and painful death. They exhorted everyone who listened to follow Messiah's example and pursue righteous judgment in the same way Moses instructed their Hebrew ancestors.

Knowing the human tendency toward excess and error, Yeshua and His apostles added some boundaries and context to their instructions. Even so, there is paradox and great potential for hypocrisy in what they taught about judging. Here's a sample:

Stop judging, so that you may not be judged. For with the judgment you judge, you will be judged; and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.

Matthew 7:1-2 TLV

Do not judge by appearance, but judge righteously.

John 7:24 TLV

Therefore you are without excuse, O man—every one of you who is judging. For by whatever you judge another, you condemn yourself. For you who judge practice the same things. We know that God's judgment on those who practice such things is based on truth. But you, O man—judging those practicing such things yet doing the same—do you suppose that you will escape the judgment of God? Or do you belittle the riches of His kindness and tolerance and patience—not realizing that God's kindness leads you to repentance?

Romans 2:1-4

Does any one of you, when he has a matter against his neighbor, dare to go to court before the unrighteous and not before the *kedoshim* [holy ones; saints]? Don't you know that the *kedoshim* will judge the world? And if the world is to be judged by you, are you incompetent to judge trivial matters? Don't you know that

we will judge angels? How much more the matters of this life! So if you have courts for matters of this life, why do you appoint as judges those who have no standing in the community? I say this to put you to shame! Isn't there even one wise man among you who will be able to settle disputes between his brethren? Instead, a brother goes to court against a brother—and before unbelievers at that!

1 Corinthians 6:1-6

For if we were judging ourselves thoroughly, we wouldn't be coming under judgment. But when we are judged, we are being disciplined by the Lord so that we might not be condemned along with the world.

1 Corinthians 11:31-32 TLV

If our Messiah told us not to judge others so we would not be judged, how can Paul instruct Yeshua's followers to judge properly? Once again it seems our Creator is setting us up for failure: if we don't judge, He will judge us, but if we do judge, He will judge us even more harshly. How can that be fair?

Difficult matters like these highlight the importance of learning how to divide the Word of Truth rightly and apply it properly. Ancient Israel set up judges and officers who judged the nation according to the standards established by Israel's God. They had no jurisdiction to judge outsiders unless they attached themselves to Israel and became subject to Israel's laws. So it is with Israel today – not only the Jewish nation of Israel reestablished as an independent country, but those of us who have attached ourselves to Israel's Messiah. The standards of right conduct He taught and lived out are the laws of His Kingdom which we are obligated to learn and obey.

For now, we live in other kingdoms. We must obey the laws of the nations in which we live while doing the best we can to obey our King. One day, when this global exile is over and our King reigns from Jerusalem, we will see how He intended the judges and officers of Israel to carry out righteous judgment. But there's no need to wait until then; we have the opportunity every day to practice righteous judgment of ourselves, our families, and our congregational communities. That's how we learn to be trustworthy stewards of our Creator's world, and how we transform our seemingly no-win situation into a glorious peace that passes understanding.