TORAH STUDIES

SHOFTIM

TO BE HUMAN IS TO BE LIKE A . . . TREE?

Identifying the Hallmark of Our Humanity—And How to Make It Last

PARSHAH OVERVIEW
Shoftim

Moses instructs the people of Israel to appoint judges and law enforcement officers in every city. "Justice, justice shall you pursue," he commands them, and they must administer it without corruption or favoritism. Crimes must be meticulously investigated and evidence thoroughly examined—a minimum of two credible witnesses is required for conviction and punishment.

In every generation, says Moses, there will be those entrusted with the task of interpreting and applying the laws of the Torah. "According to the law that they will teach you, and the judgment they will instruct you, you shall do; you shall not turn away from the thing that they say to you, to the right nor to the left."

Shoftim also includes the prohibitions against idolatry and sorcery, laws governing the appointment and behavior of a king, and guidelines for the creation of "cities of refuge" for the inadvertent murderer. Also set forth are many of the rules of war: the exemption from battle for one who has just built a home, planted a vineyard, or married, or is "afraid and soft-hearted"; the requirement to offer terms of peace before attacking a city; and the prohibition against wanton destruction of something of value, exemplified by the law that forbids cutting down a fruit tree when laying siege. (In this context, the Torah makes the famous statement, "For a person is a tree of the field.")

The *parshah* concludes with the law of the *eglah arufah*—the special procedure to be followed when a person is killed by an unknown murderer and their body is found in a field—which underscores the responsibility of the community and its leaders not only for what they do but also for what they might have prevented from being done.

How can we achieve internalized inspiration, and how can we stay motivated when inspiration passes?

1. Why depart from the literal meaning of the verse only to settle on an obscure analogy about Torah scholars? What is the explanation of this Talmudic exchange?

DOMEM

TZOME'ACH

CHAI

MEDABER

2. Trees, *tzome'ach*, are a lower life form than human beings, *medaber*. Why is the Talmud insistent on equating the two?

Tzome'ach is always visibly connected to its source of life.

We, the *medaber*, feel independent from our source of life.

The four levels of creation exist not only in a person's body but within the soul.
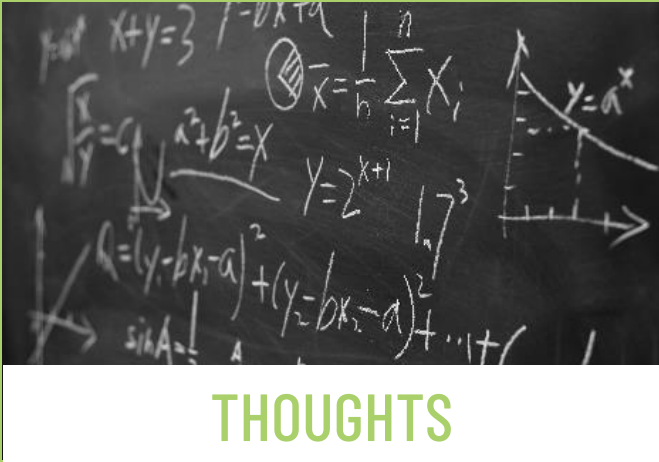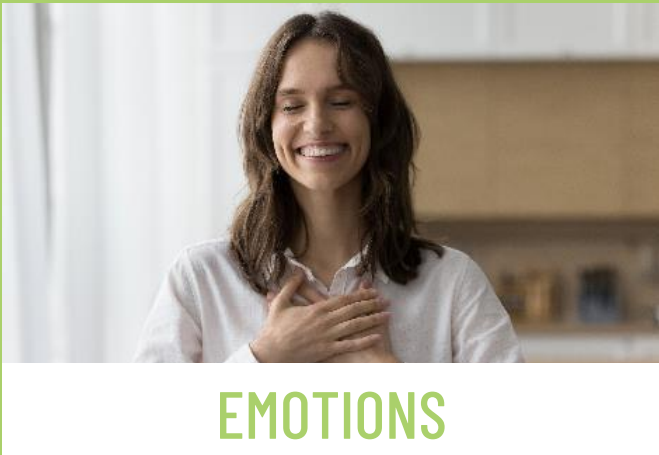
KETER

INTELLECT

THOUGHTS

EMOTIONS

Like *tzome'ach*, emotions are always connected to their source—to who we really are.

2. The Torah calls humans emotional beings, therefore equating *tzome'ach* and *medaber*, because under the influence of intellect, one's emotions are their superior quality.

1. To be fully human, the Talmud tells us, is for the mind to reign supreme over the heart—for intellect to guide, to even change, our emotions.

   This is what the Talmud means when it says that if a Torah scholar is refined, we should learn from them.

Emotions deeply connect to our true self; thus, inspiration is a true expression of the soul.

Inspiration is a true expression of the soul, even after it fades. To stay connected, we must bridge the gap between intellect and emotions.

KEY POINTS

1. The world is divided, generally speaking, into the four categories of *domem* (inanimate), *tzome'ach* (plants), *chai* (animals), and *medaber* (humans).

2. Human beings, called "micro-worlds," also contain these four levels, both on a physical level and on a soul level.

3. The intellectual faculty of the soul is called chai, and it is not connected to the soul in any apparent way; the emotional faculties of the soul are called *tzome'ach*, and they are clearly connected to the soul's essence.

4. The greatest accomplishment a human being can achieve is to use their intellect to harness their emotions.

5. Our inspiration is an expression of our emotions, and, by extension, of the essence of our soul, our true self—even if it fades thereafter.