

***Parashah* and Politics: How Torah Changed the World**

Parashat Shoftim, Deuteronomy, Chapters 16-21

By Rabbi Meir Soloveichik

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A Painting, a Tree, and Identity

It was in 1844 that William Turner gave us the painting *Rain, Steam, and Speed – The Great Western Railway*. This is a depiction of a train bursting through the English countryside as the wet natural weather mixes with the steam that emits from the locomotive.



It is considered one of the great paintings embodying the industrial revolution: the intrusion of the steam engine, and the incredible velocity that it made possible, into the idyllic natural realm. No one had created a painting like this before; usually art is an attempt to create a moment in time, or in a certain sense, to achieve, through a static image, the slowing down of time itself. Here, the opposite is occurring: as many note, a train looks nothing like this; the fine details of the many cars are nowhere to be seen. Instead, here—in a painting that cannot move—what Turner has given us somehow in this engine is, as many note, akin to motion incarnate. It

is less a particular train than a vision of velocity. The strangeness, the newness, the power of this painting at the time is difficult to describe, and we would do best to quote one of the storied critics and writers of the age, William Makepeace Thackeray. He wrote:

Mr. Turner . . . has out-prodigied almost all former prodigies. He has made a picture with real rain, behind which is real sunshine, and you expect a rainbow every minute. Meanwhile, there comes a train down upon you, really moving at the rate of fifty miles an hour, and which the reader had best make haste to see, lest it should dash out of the picture, and be away up Charing Cross through the wall opposite. All these wonders are performed with means not less wonderful than the effects are. The rain, in the astounding picture called “Rain-Steam-Speed,” is composed of dabs of dirty putty slapped on to the canvas with a trowel; the sunshine scintillates out of very thick smeary lumps of chrome yellow. The shadows are produced by cool tones of crimson lake, and quiet glazings of vermilion. Although the fire in the steam-engine looks as if it were red, I am not prepared to say that it is not painted with cobalt and pea-green. And as for the manner in which the “Speed” is done, of that the less said the better—only it is a positive fact that there is a steam-coach going fifty miles an hour. The world has never seen anything like this picture.

But is the painting *only* about a train, solely about speed? Or is there more here than meets the eye—rather, perhaps there is more here that actually, upon careful study, truly meets the eye? In fact, what J.M.W. Turner has done is give us, in one work of art, two depictions of the human being. Indeed, I know of no painting that so perfectly captures this deep dichotomy, this profound tension within human nature, no painting that so sublimely encapsulates two interpretations of a single verse in the Torah whose ambiguity is itself an essential lens for looking within ourselves—a verse that has been very much on my mind this past week.

The *parashah*, known as “*Shoftim*” or “Judges,” is about the political structure of Israelite society. It begins with the judiciary: with the obligation to appoint juridical authorities throughout the land who will produce “*mishpat tsedek*,” “righteous judgement.” The Torah then goes on to describe the supreme court of the land, which will be housed in “the place which the Lord your God will choose” (Deuteronomy 17:8–10), a reference to what will become Jerusalem.

Having set out the judiciary, the reading then turns to the role of the king. While it is not at all clear whether a monarchy is something that the Torah is demanding, or merely predicting, the laws pertaining to the king are set out with clarity, to ensure that the ruler does not embrace the ways of pagan kingship.

These elements of the description of the polity are to be expected. And then, suddenly, something surprising appears. The Torah commands an interesting caveat regarding war: when besieging a city, one must abstain from wanton, unnecessary destruction of any fruit trees in the area. The reason is given in the conclusion to the verse:

ki ha-adam ets ha-sadeh la-vo aleha ba-matsor. (Deuteronomy 20:19)

This enigmatic phrase—“*ki ha-adam ets ha-sadeh*”—seems to be making a comparison or contrast between human beings and trees, but it is not quite clear what exactly it is. So ambiguous is this verse that, as we



discussed in Bible 365, it has attracted, over the centuries, two basic interpretations that are the exact opposite of one another. I will present both, drawing, as we shall see, on the insights of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik's writings.

We begin with Rashi, who understands the verse as a question:

For is man like a tree in the field, that you will come upon it in siege?

We are thus presented with an ambiguous verse, with the Torah not making clear what it means. Either man is nothing like a tree, or man is exactly like one.

In other words, one cannot cut down a fruit tree, because one is engaging in war against men, not botanical specimens. The Torah is presenting us with a question that is meant to be read rhetorically: do not cut down the fruit tree in the midst of war. For is man akin to a tree in the field? Not at all! Men are men, trees are trees, and never the twain shall meet. Human beings are nothing like trees, and therefore, if you are

waging war against your fellow man, keep the trees out of it, if that is possible. That is Rashi's reading.

There is, however, another way of understanding this verse: not as a rhetorical question, but as an affirmative statement. When you wage war, do not cut down the fruit tree, because the tree is akin to you, and therefore even when violence must regrettably take place, spare the trees if they are unnecessary to the battle being waged. This is the approach taken by Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Yehuda Berlin (Russia, 1816–1893).

Why would a human being be akin to a tree? The answer, as Rabbi Soloveitchik suggests, is that we, like trees, have *roots*. We are defined by our past, by our origins, by the roots that also bind us to others.

We are thus presented with an ambiguous verse, with the Torah not making clear what it means. Either man is nothing like a tree, or man is exactly like one. Or so it may seem. It was in the early 1970s that Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik composed his extraordinary essay "Majesty and Humility." As we have mentioned before, this essay, like many he wrote in these years, must be put in the context of the space race, in which Rabbi Soloveitchik was deeply interested. In this essay, Rabbi Soloveitchik reflected on how the two different interpretations of the verse correspond to two aspects of human nature. On the one hand, a human being is nothing like a tree, for human beings are mobile and possess the urge to explore:

man is cosmic through his mobility. Man is a mobile being. He can easily detach himself from native surroundings and adapt himself to new environs. His adaptability to new conditions transcends that of the plant and the animal. The verse in Deuteronomy . . . contains a rhetorical question: "Is man like the tree of the field?" Is the tree as mobile as man? Certainly not! Man's greatness and distinctiveness find expression in his ceaseless mobility. The tree is inseparable from the soil. Man can, and does, move away from home.



And yet, Rabbi Soloveitchik argues, we are also very much like trees: rooted to our origins, to our families, to places that give us meaning. The urge to explore notwithstanding, the formation of bonds, of roots, is essential to a flourishing life, and this too is built into our own nature. As he put it:

man may roam along the charted and uncharted lanes of the universe, he may reach for the skies. Yet the traveler, the adventurer out to conquer infinity, will surely return home. . . .

The home for which man yearns attracts him like a powerful magnet; it brings him back, no matter how far he has traveled. “Home is the sailor, home from the sea, and the hunter home from the hill”: these beautiful lines by Robert Louis Stevenson contain more than a nostalgic note.

For this aspect of humankind, there is a rootedness to our nature, and from this perspective, the verse seeks not to contrast human beings to fruit trees, but rather to compare them. Rabbi Soloveitchik adds:

man is indeed like the tree in the field. In this context, the verse should be interpreted as an affirmative statement, not a rhetorical question. Man is indeed a rooted being, attached and committed to a home—stead—no matter how far he may have traveled.

So, which is correct? Is man like a tree in the field? Are human beings rooted creatures? Or are they nothing like trees, are they explorers, achievers? They are both. And if the verse about trees and human beings is ambiguous, if the commentators disagree in its interpretation, we can indeed exclaim that *eilu va-eilu divrei Elokim hayyim*, both approaches are the words of the living God, both pick out aspects of ourselves.

And the truth is that this duality can be found in Turner’s painting. Superficially, the work is all about how the human being is *nothing* like a rooted tree: the train, the product of human ingenuity, charges out of the canvas. But that is not the whole painting. Look carefully. The train has been framed on both sides not only by nature, but by tiny and exquisite human beings. And whereas the one noticeable element of the steam engine is motion, what marks these small individuals is the opposite.



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Look on the left; there we see a couple idyllically floating in the water. There is some motion, such as it is, but they are not actually trying to get anywhere; they are attempting to experience the water, rather than to move from point A to point B. The same can be said for the group of dancers who stand on the dry land and perhaps wave over to those in the boat. Here too they are in some form of motion, but the motion keeps them bound to their specific sphere, rather than allowing them to rush off elsewhere.

Then, on the right side of the painting, we see someone who is engaged not in work but rather in leisure. He is walking behind his animals and seems to be plowing a field.



Thus, Turner is giving us here not only speed; but also its opposite. He gives us technology, machinery, motion—and also the reverse. The contrast is certainly intentional, and therefore asks us to ponder not only speed but also rootedness, connection, the bonds between people and the land.

I know of no painting that so perfectly captures the complexity of Rabbi Soloveitchik's worldview: at the heart of his philosophy is the notion that technological achievement is part of human nature and is a God-given capacity, but he also stressed that society must remember that it is in its rootedness in its past, its origins, and its identity that true meaning is to be found.

The themes of rootedness and of exploration were at the heart of Rachel Goldberg-Polin's heartbreaking eulogy this week for her murdered son Hersh. She spoke of Hersh's love of exploration, and

[Rachel Goldberg Polin's] eulogy captured the very essence of Israel itself: a country that has had many an impact far beyond its borders, whose technological achievements are the envy of the earth, whose citizens have dreams of changing the world. And yet it is also a country rooted in its history, its land, and its people . . .



then, in a reference to his cruel captivity, she said:

Ok, sweet boy, go now on your journey. I hope it's as good as the trips you dreamed about, because, finally, my sweet boy, finally, finally, finally, finally you are FREE!

Throughout the speech, she also spoke of rootedness; she spoke not only of a journey, but of her son now meeting her grandparents, “who will adore you.” And of course, the pain and poignancy were magnified in the moment because in the end, the rootedness between son and parents remained—as we know it always will—a rootedness that bridges heaven and earth.

The eulogy captured the very essence of Israel itself: a country that has had many an impact far beyond its borders, whose technological achievements are the envy of the earth, whose citizens have dreams of changing the world. And yet it is also a country rooted in its history, its land, and its people, and this rootedness binds its people to one another. That is why it is a country in such pain now. But that rootedness is the very essence of its meaning, and the source of its deepest strength. And that strength, and meaning, will see it through to brighter times ahead—times that we pray will come soon.

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May the merit of our study together bring a swift victory to the Jewish people.

Additional Resources

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik on the Duality of Man, “Majesty and Humility,” *Tradition*, Spring 1978.
[Click here to read.](#)

Rachel Goldberg-Polin's Eulogy for Her Son Hersh Goldberg-Polin, September 2, 2024. [Click here to watch.](#)

