

Appearing Before the Sovereign

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Parshat Mishpatim

Three times a year, all your males shall appear before the Sovereign Eternal. (Exodus 23:17)

The Talmudic sages (*Hagigah 2a*) understand the word יראה (*yei'ra'eh, shall appear*) not solely in its plain-text meaning, as an instruction of something to do, but rather as a spiritual and emotional instruction, mandating an attitude. Not simply that we are to appear before G*d, but that we are to be aware, to perceive ourselves as “looked at” by G*d. The Command is not simply to report to G*d’s Presence, but to bring ourselves to an awareness of being in G*d’s Presence.

But then two other questions arise almost automatically. Why only the males? And why just three times a year?

We have three “Pilgrimage” Festivals – Pesah in the spring, Shavuot in the summer, and Succot in the autumn. (There is actually a fourth, Sh’mini Atzeret, a winter Festival, but it is “tacked on” to the end of Succot, and we do not count it as a separate pilgrimage.) The three Pilgrimage Festivals, then, represent the annual cycle of seasons. So three times a year symbolizes the entire year.

There is a more pressing question, however. Why just the males? To answer that question, we need to examine the linguistic origin of the Hebrew word (זכור, *z'chur'cha*) which is rendered *your males*.

First of all, we observe that the Hebrew word is a singular, not a plural form; a literal rendering might be *each male of* [meaning *among*] *you*. *Your males* should more properly be *z'chareichem*. How, then, do we understand *z'chur'cha*? Perhaps it connotes *thy male-ness*, and that warrants further examination.

The Hebrew linguistic root זכר *zayin-kaf-resh*, which is the root of the words meaning both *male* and *memory*, carries an ancient meaning of *dominance*. (Please

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do not shoot the messenger. I report; I do not advocate.) Sociologically, males dominated females in ancient times, in the era when the Hebrew language was developing. And memory, remembrance, dominates the mind and the consciousness, so the linguistic link is understandable, even if we, in our modern consciousness, find it rather problematic.

How, then, do we now understand the verse, today, in our modern consciousness? Let us keep in mind that the Torah's stories – the situations, the events, the people, even the inanimate objects – represent aspects of each individual's personality. In particular, we may understand *z'chur'cha*, falling back upon its ancient connotation, as the dominating aspect of the individual's personality, or, in this instance, as the dominating aspect of the nation's personality. And now a new level of meaning is beginning to emerge.

Those who – or that which – dominates the nation must appear before G*d seasonally, throughout the year. Let those who are in a position (or an attitude) of dominance be reminded on a regular basis that they are actually subordinate to the One Who is above all.

And, as it was for the nation, so it is to be for the individual. Each individual is commanded to be aware of that within *ter*¹ psyche which longs to exert control. Each individual is commanded to bring that aspect of *ter* psyche before the Eternal in every season of the year. And each individual is commanded to acknowledge, in that aspect of *ter* psyche which longs to exert control, that the Eternal – and only the Eternal – is truly Sovereign.

To an understanding that, however strong we may seem to be, however important we may seem to be, however dominant and controlling we may seem to be, we are always under the Sovereignty of G*d, may we be speedily directed.

Shabbat Shalom.

¹ Gender-neutral back-formed singular of *their*. The nominative case is *tey*, the objective case *tem*.