

President's Column: A Just Society

by Helen B. Bloch

The Book of Deuteronomy contains lengthy passages on how to maintain a just society. We are told to appoint judges and officers in all of our towns, that judgment should not be perverted, to refrain from taking notice of someone's face, to not accept bribes, as bribes blind the eyes of the wise and subvert righteous words. *Deuteronomy 16:18-19*.

A famous wealthy rabbi, Rabbi Shimon HaLevi Epstein, was a merchant who had a business partner named Kuppel Halperin. At some point a misunderstanding occurred based on a clause in a contract between them. They decided to appear before their local Beit Din, rabbinical court, to obtain a ruling. Upon their arrival they asked the attendant, i.e. the court's clerk, to have their matter heard by the Rabbi. The Rabbi agreed and had the attendant bring them in to the Rabbi's chamber. As the men entered, they were shocked to see that the Rabbi had a tallis, prayer shawl, over his eyes so that he could not see them. Also, the Rabbi failed to extend his hand to greet them, nor did he offer them a seat. Simply, he called out in a rather harsh tone, "Zimmel and Kuppel! Whichever one of you is the claimant, let him begin now and state his case!" The men felt insulted by the cold reception, especially since they were big donors and were used to being treated with honor. Nevertheless, they each presented their case. Upon hearing the case the Rabbi gave his ruling. Afterward, the Rabbi asked whether each party accepted his ruling. They each agreed to accept the ruling of the Rabbi. Immediately, the Rabbi removed the tallis from his face and offered each of them a warm and friendly handshake. Next, he had his attendant serve the men refreshments. The men were perturbed and could not understand the role reversal. Sensing their dismay, the Rabbi explained that the proper protocol in a Jewish court is to consider both parties as guilty. When the parties are dismissed from the court after having accepted the judgment, they shall be considered as innocent. He went on to say that if a judge were to treat the litigants with utmost dignity and honor as they enter the court's chamber, each of them would see himself as being totally righteous in the judge's eyes, which may cause them to exaggerate their claims and even bend the truth. If this were to happen, justice would not be served. Thus, as the judge, the Rabbi believed he should receive all parties in a plain manner so as to best determine the truth in order to arrive at the correct determination.

We are approaching the High Holidays, a time of judgment and self-reflection. How are we going to act in the impending Jewish year? Are we strong enough to get past how one looks on the outside and simply judge a person based on character, as directed by our Torah in Deuteronomy? Will we be careful not to engage in quid pro quos, as unfortunately occurs often in Chicago politics, especially when we seek elected or appointed positions, whether it be judicial or another branch of government? Will we be like the Rabbi who endeavors to judge without being swayed by hyperbole?

Decalogue's motto Tzedek Tzedek Tirdof—Justice, Justice Shall You Pursue, is borne out by the way in which we carry ourselves. For instance, how we participate in the Alliance of Bar Associations for Judicial Screening must remain fair and impartial even if it means giving a less than favorable rating to one of our own members. Some individuals feel based on their affinity to a certain group that they should be afforded certain ratings or opportunities. Yes, we seek diversity on the bench, elsewhere in government, and jobs as a whole, but diversity must be achieved by applying the same set of qualifications to all applicants. No different than when we get a phone call from a prospective client or job applicant—we should not treat that prospect differently simply based on the sound of their name or the sound of their voice. We should speak with equal deference to all and make choices based on a defined set of criteria that is blind to color, race, or creed.

I hope you will join Decalogue in its endeavor to promote a more just society by serving on one of our committees and participating in our events. Please share your ideas with us.

Shanah Tovah Tikatevu—have a sweet, happy, healthy, and prosperous New Year.

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