

# Mussar HaTorah

Torah Insights into Human Nature – Dedicated in memory of Rabbi A. Henach Leibowitz zt"l

2 Elul, 5769 Vol. 10, No. 43

Parashas Shoftim

“PLACE UPON YOURSELVES A KING THAT HASHEM CHOOSES...”  
(DEVARIM 17:15)

**Shmuel's vision  
penetrated beyond the  
color of Dovid's skin**

WHEN SHMUEL HANAVI came to anoint Dovid as king, Shmuel was taken aback with what he saw and hesitated to anoint him. Shmuel saw that Dovid had the same ruddy complexion as Eisav (Shmuel I 16:12). The Midrash (Bereishis Rabbah 63:8) explains that Shmuel's vision penetrated beyond the color of Dovid's skin – he saw that Dovid's shared complexion with Eisav indicated a shared inborn tendency to spill blood. Shmuel was afraid that Dovid was an inappropriate choice for king as he would be likely to carry out this tendency. Hashem told Shmuel not to fear, and to anoint Dovid as king of Israel. Eisav killed according to the dictates of his own reasoning, Hashem explained, but Dovid, on the other hand, will only spill blood based on the advice – and with the approval – of the Sanhedrin.

Obviously, Shmuel's concern was not that Dovid would be a cold-blooded murderer. Dovid was no Esav by anyone's stretch of the imagination. The concern was only that this innate tendency towards shedding blood would affect Dovid on some delicate, perhaps microscopic level, but nevertheless play a critical role when a complex case would arise involving a capital crime. At a pivotal moment, it could color Dovid's judgement ever so slightly and result in a guilty verdict, thereby causing an innocent person to die.

**Why was Shmuel  
concerned about  
this issue?**

However, the comparison still seems incongruous. Eisav was an evildoer who gave in to his base desires and to his inborn tendency to kill. Dovid, to the contrary, was a great *tzaddik* who had devoted his entire life to self-control and character improvement, and therefore deserved to be king of the Jewish people. Dovid would certainly think through his actions clearly and deliberately. He should have the self awareness to recognize and over-rule his predisposition for bloodshed, and not allow it to taint his judgement to kill innocent individuals. Why was Shmuel concerned about this issue?

There is a difference between a *middah* – a character trait – and a *techunah* – an inborn personality type. It is not easy to change a *middah* (Reb Yisrael Salanter once said it is easier to learn through *Shas* than to correct a single *middah*) but it can be done with patience, perserverance and hard work through the study and techniques of *mussar*. A *techunah*, Reb Yisrael explained, is a basic part of one's nature, and cannot be eliminated, only monitored and controlled. We see from Shmuel's concern that these inclinations are not to be taken lightly. They are real and they do indeed color our every decision. Even Dovid HaMelech would have been led astray (on life-and-death decisions!) by his nature had he not had the Sanhedrin to advise him otherwise.

**We must be humble  
enough to recognize our  
shortcomings and ask  
advice**

We see the importance of understanding ourselves, our personality type, and how it can affect our decision-making process. Even if we ourselves might be Torah scholars – as Dovid Hamelech certainly was – we must be humble enough to recognize our shortcomings and ask advice from an impartial Torah source. As we begin the month of Elul and the process of *teshuva*, this will be a key factor in ensuring our success in the battle towards perfection, self mastery and a favorable verdict in the coming Days of Judgement.