The Judges of Your Generation

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Shofetim

by Rabbi Marc D. Angel

When the Talmud cannot answer a question definitively, it sometimes uses the word "Teiku". This is understood to be an acronym for the words; Tishbi yetaretz kushyot ubaayot i.e. Elijah the prophet (when the Messiah comes) will resolve these difficult questions and problems.

The famed Hassidic master, Rabbi Levi Yitzhak of Berdichev, asked: in Messianic times, there will be resurrection of the dead. That will include Moses. So why does the Talmud say that in Messianic times we will go to Elijah for answers to our questions? Why don't we go to Moses himself? Surely, Moses was the greatest of our teachers and prophets, and outranks Elijah as a source for Torah truth.

Rabbi Levi Yitzhak answered: When Moses died, he lost contact with us. When he will be resurrected, he will be unaware of all the changes that have taken place over the course of the centuries. On the other hand, Elijah the prophet never lost contact with us. He comes to our Passover seders; he attends the circumcisions of our sons; he turns up to help the poor and downtrodden. Since Elijah has stayed in touch with us, and since he knows the world in which we live, he is precisely the one to whom we should address our difficult questions. Moses will not be able to answer these questions as well, because he doesn't understand the context of our lives as well as Elijah.

Rabbi Levi Yitzhak's insight is reflected in this Shabbat's Torah reading. "If there arises a matter too difficult for your in judgment...you shall come unto the judge that shall be in those days." Our commentators observe: of course we must turn to the judge who shall be in our days; to whom else can we turn? Yet the Torah emphasizes the need to consult a judge familiar with the contemporary situation, lest people say: the judges of today are not as great as those of earlier generations. Let us follow the opinions of the great sages of former times. No, says the Torah, this is not the correct approach. Even if the earlier generations had people as great as Moses, we still must turn to those sages of our own time who are familiar with the context of our lives. Law isn't established in a vacuum. Questions cannot be properly addressed without a keen awareness of the current

factors that impact on us.

This important lesson reminds us that the rabbis and teachers of our generation need to stay in touch with the realities of the lives of their communities. People should not say: we rely on the decisions of the rabbis of earlier generations because they were greater. Nor should rabbis themselves adopt this attitude. Surely, we wish to learn from the wisdom of the sages of earlier generations: but the responsibility to answer today's questions rests with "the judge who shall be in our days".

The genius of the Torah way of life is that it applies eternal truths to an ever-changing world. It accomplishes this by being eternally "relevant", by staying current, by staying in close touch with the people and their needs, by demanding that the rabbis of each generation assume responsibility.

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