



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

DEVARIM > Shoftim

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

September 10, 2016
Shoftim

9/11 Fifteen Years Later



Meaningful Sermons *“Words from the Heart Enter the Heart”*

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ABSTRACT

Tomorrow is September 11th. Fifteen years ago, on a beautiful Tuesday morning, the world changed forever. The clash of civilizations that was brewing beneath the surface for millennia, a clash between east and west, suddenly and horrifically burst into the open. Two witnesses, two towers, bore undeniable and devastating testimony for the entire world to see.

Things have not gotten better ever since. Terrorism continues to haunt us: Attacks across the globe, from Nice to San Bernardino, not to mention the state of war in Israel, and the ongoing wars in Syria, Iraq and the entire region. Our way of life, down to our air travel has been disrupted.

What have we learned over the past fifteen years? Since that tragic day, hundreds of thousands of human beings have died in what is actually a religious war, a clash of life and death. Much of the world does not acknowledge this reality, even when the testimony and evidence is there in the blood, tears and broken bodies.

The Twin Towers were twin witnesses to this fact – as is the anguish playing across the Middle East, in particular Israel, every day.

We, the Jewish people, bear witness to the horror of today just as we have borne witness to the world's atrocities since we became a nation in Egypt. Indeed, one of the reasons (maybe *the* reason) that the forces of darkness have attacked us again and again is the same reason the Mafia dons try to kill all the witnesses – the existence of our light haunts their consciences.

And that brings us to what the Torah has to say on the subject of witnesses.

The Torah, the book of divine living, requires us to have two witnesses in order to establish and confirm a law, a transaction, or any new reality. Why are two witnesses required by the Torah? And how is this connected to the two witnesses of the Twin Towers?

9/11 FIFTEEN YEARS LATER: TWIN TOWERS, TWIN WITNESSES

1. Twin Towers

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2. Parshat Shoftim

This week's Torah reading – *Parshat Shoftim* – is the source for a fundamental principle of Jewish law that is experienced firsthand in every Jewish marriage under a *chuppah*, "in accordance with the law of Moses and Israel." Namely, two witnesses are required to confirm that the marriage took place.

Indeed, two witnesses are generally required by Jewish law – whether it's to confirm a marriage, to establish the appearance of a new moon, or to bring a capital case before a court of law.

Jewish law bases itself on the following Torah verses:

By the mouth of two witnesses, or three witnesses, shall the one liable to death be put to death; he shall not be put to death by the mouth of one witness¹

¹ Deuteronomy 17:6.

One witness shall not rise up against any person for any iniquity or for any sin ... By the mouth of two witnesses, or by the mouth of three witnesses, shall the matter be confirmed (yakum davar).²

A few questions:

1. Why does the Torah require at least two witnesses, and why isn't one enough?
2. And why does the Torah find it necessary to state, *the mouth of two witnesses, or three witnesses* – if two witnesses suffice, surely it is obvious that three would also suffice. And since we know that the Torah is never superfluous, what is the meaning of the part about three?
3. The Torah uses an interesting choice of Hebrew words to state that the role of the witness is to confirm – *yakum* – which literally means “to stand” or “to last forever.” How do the witnesses make the matter stand forever?

3. Affirm or Confirm?

Before we examine the answers to these questions, I need to tell you that Jewish law distinguishes between two types of witnesses: one type is called *eidei birrur*, clarifying witnesses or affirming witnesses, and the other is called *eidei kiyum*, establishing witnesses or confirming witnesses.³

What is the difference?⁴

² Deuteronomy 19:15.

³ See Kiddushin 65b.

⁴ See Tzafnat Paneach, Klalei Hatorah v'Hamitzvot, Eidut, quoted in Likkutei Sichot, vol. 19, p. 188 fn. #4.

Affirming witnesses, like those who witness a loan, do not create the facts, but merely testify to their existence. They clarify the facts by providing testimony that something – such as the loan – took place. By so doing, they hold both parties accountable with their testimony before a Jewish court of law. However, even without such affirming witnesses, the terms of the loan are binding upon the parties involved.

Confirming witnesses, like those who witness a wedding, are a required part of the wedding, and they actually establish the binding nature of the nuptials. They aren't just witnessing the fact; they are part of making it happen. To the extent that even if both bride and groom readily were to agree that they were married, without two witnesses the matrimony is not considered valid.⁵ In this regard, the witnesses cause the matter "to stand" and to "last forever- *yakum*. They don't only affirm, but actually "confirm" the reality.

4. When are Witnesses Necessary?

Witnesses are necessary only in a situation when something is unknown or concealed. When something is revealed for all to see, witnesses are not required and, in fact, are superfluous. Additionally, things that could be known and revealed through further analysis, even if they presently remain a mystery, also do not require witnesses.⁶

For example:

You do not require witnesses to bear testimony that you are alive, or that the world exists. It is clear that you are alive and that the world exists. Everything around us testifies to this fact. The Book of Job⁷ states, *From my flesh I behold G-d* – indeed, one need only look at one's own physical corpus (the plethora of systems, trillions of cells, all in astonishing unison) to conclude there is a Creator. How much more so when one multiplies a single body of flesh by all the multitudes of creation –

⁵ See Kiddushin 65b.

⁶ See Likkutei Torah, Pikudei, p. 4aff.

⁷ Job 19:26.

the planets, the stars, all the cosmic systems of the universe! Thus, confirming witnesses are unnecessary – there is a world, the world exists, this logically means that its Creator, its life-force, exists. Just like a book testifies to its author, with no need for witnesses, the universe testifies to its Cosmic Architect.

Witnesses are necessary to testify to something deeper than logic, more profound than analytics, more ethereal than basic faith, more essential than commitment – such witnesses testify to true reality, not because it makes sense (though it does), not because it is believable (though it is), but simply because the witnesses have seen it.

Witnesses have one job: to reveal the unknown, to clarify the concealed, to establish the existence of a deeper reality.

In this physical world, G-d created various testifiers or witnesses to affirm or confirm a mysterious higher reality that the world belies. For example, G-d's very name is called testimony.⁸ The Jewish people are called witnesses.⁹ The mitzvot are called testimonies.¹⁰ Heaven and earth are called testifiers.¹¹ As is the Temple, G-d's home on earth.¹²

While many witnesses *clarify* and *affirm* G-d's existence, the reality of light, of a Creator, of goodness in this world (like the first category of witnesses which only affirm a pre-existing reality), only one group of witnesses *establishes and confirms* that reality here on Planet Earth. Those witnesses are the Children of Israel.¹³ They affirm not only the pre-existing (logical and philosophical) fact that G-d exists and created the universe, but they actually are part of the process of confirming and establishing the Divine Unity in our realm of existence, by transforming the material world into a Divine home through Torah and Mitzvot.

⁸ See Psalms 122:4 and Rashi ad loc.

⁹ See Isaiah 43:10, 12.

¹⁰ Psalms 119:14.

¹¹ See Deuteronomy 30:19. See also Isaiah 43:10, 12, and Zohar III, p. 86a; Sefer Halikutim, Eidut.

¹² See Exodus 38:21.

¹³ See Likkutei Sichot, vol. 19, p. 190-191.

5. 9/11 and the Jews' Role as Witnesses

Sometimes we celebrate joyous events, like the establishment of a righteous country like the United States of America, or a miracle such as the Six Day War victory, or personal miracles in our lives – all of which testify to and reveal a higher reality that was concealed (prior to the special or miraculous event).

And, devastatingly, sometimes we have sad events possibly, which reveal a crack in humanity. As Jews, we have experienced too many of these to count and may we never ever again.

September 11 was one such distressing moment, when two towers, two witnesses and more than three-thousand dead testified to a darkness in our midst. It exposed a rift in the world, a rift between mindsets, a clash between civilizations, a war that is playing out to this day in Israel, Syria, Iraq, Europe, the U.S., and the world at large.

The free world must address this. It does not want to, but it really has no choice. It will not get better if we don't deal with this issue. There are seven billion people on this planet and every single one must do his or her part.

As a rabbi, I want to speak about our role as Jews. We are a tiny percentage quantitatively but we pack a massive punch qualitatively.

We have been placed onto this earth to be *eidei kiyum*, confirming witnesses who establish G-dliness, goodness, and holiness in this earth.

How do we do this?

The answer lies in why the Torah requires specifically two witnesses, and why the Torah also specifically mentions three witnesses, in addition to two.

6. Why Two Witnesses?

Why does Torah law require two witnesses? Sure, it makes sense that when two distinct and unrelated people corroborate something, their testimony is far more trustworthy than one coming from one subjective person, who could have misunderstood what he witnessed, or even lie about it. But what inner meaning is there in specifically two witnesses? What intrinsic quality of testimony do two hold over one? What lesson is there for us to learn?

The Hebrew word *eidut*, meaning “testimony,” contains the same letters as the word, *daat*, meaning “knowledge.” *Daat*, as explained by the mystics, is a connector between intellect and emotion, between a seminal idea and a comprehensive definition.¹⁴ *Daat*, essentially, is composed of two distinct qualities, which allow it to be a connector. So, for example, the Torah states:

You have been shown, in order [that you] know (l'daat) that the Lord He is G-d; there is none besides Him.¹⁵ And you shall know (v'yadata) this day and place it upon your heart that the Lord He is G-d in heaven above and upon the earth below; there is none other.¹⁶

But these verses may also be read like this:

You have been shown, in order [that you] testify (l'daat) that the Lord He is G-d; there is none besides Him. And you shall testify (v'yadata) this day and consider it in your heart that the Lord He is G-d in heaven above and upon the earth below; there is none other.

Two witnesses comprise one single unit which represents the dual quality of *daat* – 1) seeing, or being shown, to know what is, in order to 2) testify for all to know as well.¹⁷

¹⁴ See Likkutei Torah, Pikudei, p. 4aff. Ohr Hatorah, Devarim, vol. II, Shoftim, p. 862.

¹⁵ Deuteronomy 4:35.

¹⁶ Deuteronomy 4:39.

¹⁷ Rashi to Deuteronomy 17:6.

7. Why Three Witnesses?

Now – why does the Torah explicitly state that both two and three witnesses could establish the matter, when three is clearly implied by two? What does the number three denote in context of our bearing witness to the divine?

The Torah is a blueprint and manual of divine instruction for our everyday lives. It is relevant for each and every one of us today in 2016, just as it has been for our parents, grandparents and ancestors.

By adding three to the number of witnesses, the Torah is providing us with priceless and eternal tools in living our lives today in the most productive and sublime way possible. It is teaching and instructing us how to bear witness in this world to all that is righteous and good.

Mitzvoth are also called *eidut*, meaning “testimony.” As King David writes in the Book of Psalms, *Following the path of Your testimonies (eidotecha) I rejoiced....*¹⁸ Mitzvoth generally come in three categories – education, service of G-d, and acts of loving-kindness (*Torah, Avodah* and *Gemilat Chasodim*); these are *three witnesses*, testifying to true reality. These three together comprise one single unit,¹⁹ that of the mitzvot as testimony.

By using the number three, in addition to the two witnesses, the Torah is offering us the methodology of bearing witness and confirming the Divine presence in the world: Through education, service and good deeds.

8. Personal Lesson #1: Witness as Knower

The primary role of the Jew, of you and I, is to share with the world knowledge of G-d. Because we have been shown the revelation of G-d, it is our role to testify to it.

¹⁸ Psalms 119:14.

¹⁹ Rashi to Deuteronomy 17:6.

Now the world knows that G-d exists, so why does it need us? Our mission is to share *daat*, witnessed knowledge. At Mount Sinai every single Jew who has ever lived and whoever will live – man, woman, child – witnessed the light of heaven and agreed to share it by testifying to its brilliance – to be a light unto nations.

This is our mission until the prophetic words of Isaiah become reality, *For the world shall be full of Divine knowledge (de'ah et Hashem as the waters covers the sea bed).*²⁰

To fulfill our role as confirming witnesses, it is incumbent upon us to understand what we know, to clarify in our minds and in the minds of our children, what we have seen.

Therefore:

1. On behalf of this holy congregation, today, in honor of the souls who perished in the Twin Towers, I am establishing and confirming a weekly/monthly class that will take one commonplace item and demonstrate how – with *daat*, the testimony of divine knowledge shown and gifted to us – that commonplace item reveals for us a higher reality, a divine message. To honor those who have passed away and to ensure it never happens again, please join me in this.
2. I am asking you to establish a time, once a week/month, to sit down with your children and share with them the testimony of knowledge – the Torah – gifted to every Jew. It could be anything from the letter Aleph, to reading a verse in the weekly Parsha, a piece of Talmud, a nice Jewish story or parable, a spiritual insight, to the understanding of an esoteric concept relating to the highest of mystical worlds.
3. I am reminding you that “you are a light unto the nations.” You, yes you. And everyone around you – your neighbors, your professional colleagues, your mailman, your accountant – looks to you for illumination. Therefore, I am asking you to prepare something inspiring to share with them every day/week or whenever the opportunity arises – and it always arises.

²⁰ Isaiah 11:9.

9. Personal Lesson #2: Witness as Doer

But knowledge is not action. That's why we need a second practical lesson for our lives.

The 613 mitzvot are called *eidut*, "testimony," because every single righteous act performed by a human being is testimony to a higher being, a confirming witness to divine reality, proof and evidence of supreme consciousness.

Better to start small and increase every day than to start big and decrease every day.

So take one testimony, take one mitzvah – such as giving charity, helping another, eating kosher, affixing a mezuzah, giving an interest free loan, keeping your word, making a blessing on food, studying Torah – and own that mitzvah. But with a twist: whichever mitzvah you take, challenge yourself to articulate (to yourself, but even more, to others) how this mitzvah is a witness, a testimony of all that is holy, divine and good in this world. This will require some study, some application, but the result will be a living and confirming testimony for all the world to see.

10. Conclusion

Fifteen years have passed since the Twin Towers fell, since two witnesses confirmed what even today much of the world wishes not to acknowledge. The fall of the Twin Towers bore witness and served as a wake-up call to the threat of terrorism around us. The world may prefer not to deal with this life-and-death issue – perhaps because dealing with it will open up questions no one wants to ask, let alone answer, and bring about a day of personal reckoning – but that doesn't take away from the testimony of the facts. And of the fact that in the past fifteen years hundreds of thousands of more men, women, and children have been killed, countless more maimed, even more whose lives have been shattered, homes destroyed, lands obliterated.

Whether we want it or not, it is the responsibility of the free world to protect humanity. Politics, borders, race, culture, religion matter not. Priority number one is to preserve life.

This clash of civilizations is not going to stop by itself. The Twin Towers are the two witnesses who confirm and affirm this fact. As are the heavens and the earth, two witnesses who have been here since creation and who have seen it all.

And, so are we, the Children of Israel. We are witnesses. It is for this reason, perhaps, that they try to kill us, that they try to wipe out Israel – we are the witnesses and we know the truth.

Evil does not like witnesses. Falsehood cannot stand truth.

The more testimony we carry, the louder we say it through our righteous actions, the more the falsehood will fade away.

Let not the testimony of the two twin witnesses in downtown Manhattan ever be destroyed. Let not the testimony of the heavens and the earth ever be silenced. Let not the testimony of the Children of Israel, the legacy we carry and the story we tell, ever be forgotten.

And, really, how could it ever be, when every single day millions of Jews glorify G-d's Holy Name throughout the world, when young boys and girls pray in innocence and study G-d's Torah, when elder statesmen with numbers tattooed on their arms smile as they watch their grandchildren under the *chuppah*, holy matrimony witnessed by two witnesses for all eternity – Hitler could not wipe out these eternal witnesses, perpetuating fruitfully, and no other dark falsehood ever could.

We are the star witnesses and we will never, ever rest our case.

During the week when we read *Parshat Shoftim*, which means “Judges,” surely the Supreme Judge of the Universe, G-d Almighty, will take our holy testimony and rule in the favor of all that is good and righteous.

Shabbat Shalom!

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