

DEVARIM · ROLES · THE GRAMMAR OF APPOINTMENT

תתן לך

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the complaint was the receipt

TITEN LECHA

*The Judges You Appoint, and the Complaint
That Forgets You Appointed Them*

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CHAPTER ONE

TWO SMALL WORDS

שופטים ושוטרים תתן לך בכל שעריך

Judges and officers you shall appoint for yourself, in all your gates — Devarim

16:18

EVERYONE READS THIS VERSE for its nouns. Shoftim — judges. Shotrim — officers. We picture a courtroom, a badge, an institution. The verse becomes a founding document for a justice system, and we file it under civics.

But the verse has four words doing the work, not two. Titen — you shall give. Lecha — for yourself. Before there is a judge in this sentence, there is a giver. Before there is an officer, there is a *for yourself*. The nouns arrive last, and they arrive already dependent — on your giving, on your self.

Read it slowly and the grammar starts to itch. The verse does not say judges exist and you should find them. It says you make them. The shofeit is not standing somewhere waiting to be discovered, robed and ready. The shofeit comes into being at the moment of titen, and comes into being *lecha* — as yours, appointed by you, for you.

This is a book about those two small words, and about what happens when we forget them. Because we forget them constantly. We forget them every time we complain about a leader, lament a teacher, rage at a politician. The forgetting is so smooth we don't feel it happen.

By the end of this short book, I want the forgetting to become audible. I want you to hear it — in your own sentences, mid-complaint — the way you hear a floorboard creak once someone points it out.

CHAPTER TWO

THE NOUN TRAP

ENGLISH IS GENEROUS with nouns. It hands them out like name tags, and once a name tag is on, it looks permanent.

Say “she is a judge” and the sentence has the same shape as “she is tall.” Grammar makes no distinction between what a person is and what a person is *currently being held as by someone else*. Both wear the same costume: subject, copula, noun. The language files “judge” next to categories we treat as fixed — as if judge and officer were kinds of human the way we casually assume male and female are kinds of human, stable, carried in the body, true regardless of who is looking.

But shofeit is not that kind of word. Nobody is a shofeit in an empty room.

Try it. Put a judge alone on a desert island. What exactly is she judging? Her robe is now a blanket. Her gavel is a hammer. The judging — the thing that made her a judge — required litigants, a community, a people who agreed to stand before her and be judged. Remove them and the noun evaporates. What’s left is a person.

So “shofeit” behaves less like a noun and more like a point of view. It is a designation conferred by the one doing the designating. A person becomes a shofeit through how another person relates to them —

brings a case to them, defers to them, stands in their gate and says: you decide. The title lives in the relating, not in the titled.

This is what the noun trap conceals. The name tag looks like it's describing the wearer. It is actually describing the person who wrote it.

And here the verse's grammar turns out to be more honest than ours. Titen lecha — the Torah never lets the noun stand alone. It arrives welded to the verb of your giving. The judge appears in the sentence only as something given, and given by you. The Torah refuses, in its very syntax, the fantasy that judges simply *are*.

CHAPTER THREE

EIN MELECH B'LO AM

THERE IS AN OLD FORMULATION: ein melech b'lo am.
No king without a people.

It sounds at first like a practical observation — a king needs subjects the way a business needs customers. But it is sharper than that. It is a claim about what a king *is*. Kingship is not a property a man carries in his body, like height. Kingship is a relation, and a relation cannot be held by one party. The moment the people stop holding their end, the king does not become a weak king. He becomes a man in an expensive chair.

The same structure runs through learning. There is no rav without a talmid. A person can be full of Torah, alone, brilliant — and still not be anyone's rebbi. The rav comes into being when a talmid decides to receive from him. The talmid, meanwhile, comes into being through that same decision. Neither precedes the other. They arise together or not at all.

The Buddhists have a name for this shape: dependent origination. Things that seem to exist independently turn out to co-arise — each one leaning on the others, none able to stand alone, all of them appearing in the same instant like the two ends of a seesaw. You cannot have an “up” end first and add the “down” end later.

Now go back to the verse and count. Titen. Lecha. Shofeit. Shoter. Four words, and not one of them can exist without the other three.

There is no titen — no act of giving — without a lecha to receive and a shofeit to be given. There is no lecha, no “for yourself,” without something being taken on for that self. There is no shofeit without the appointing and the community that stands in her gate. There is no shoter — no officer — without a judgment to enforce and a people who confer the authority to enforce it. Pull any one word out and the other three collapse. They arise simultaneously, a four-way seesaw, balanced on a single moment of appointment.

The verse is not a list of items. It is a diagram of co-arising, and you are drawn inside it. Lecha — you are one of the four words. You are not reading about the system. You are a load-bearing part of it.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE COMPLAINT

NOW WATCH WHAT HAPPENS when we complain. “Can you believe what the mayor did.” “My rebbi disappointed me.” “These politicians.” “That judge is a disgrace.” The complaint has a shape, and the shape is always the same: there is a them, fully formed, over there, holding a title — and there is a me, over here, empty-handed, commenting on them.

The complaint is a sentence with the *titen* deleted.

Because who made the mayor a mayor — for you? Not the election; the election made him a mayor for the county clerk’s records. What made him *your* mayor, the one who can disappoint you, the one whose failures land in your chest — was your ongoing act of holding him as one. Your attention. Your deference. Your decision, renewed daily and invisibly, to stand in relation to him as constituent to leader. *Titen lecha*. You gave him to yourself.

The same is true of the teacher who let you down. He became your teacher — capable of letting you down — at the moment you took the talmid’s seat. No one can betray you from a chair you didn’t place them in.

Here is the strange mechanics of it. The complaint *requires* the title in order to function. “My leader failed me” only stings because he is

your leader — a status only you can confer. So the complainer is doing two things in a single breath: actively conferring the title, and denying any hand in conferring it. Appointing and disowning the appointment, simultaneously, in one sentence.

Lament, it turns out, is not the opposite of appointment. Lament is appointment — with the giver's fingerprints wiped off.

I want to be careful here, because this is the point where the idea gets misread. This is not a claim that leaders bear no responsibility, that the politician's corruption is your fault, that the failed teacher failed no one. The shofeit's obligations are real; the Torah spends the rest of the parsha detailing them. The claim is narrower and stranger: the *role itself* — the thing being complained about — has your signature on it. You can indict the officeholder. You cannot pretend you didn't build the office.

And notice what the deletion of *titen* actually deletes: your agency. That is the hidden cost of every lament. Each complaint rehearses a small story in which you are a bystander to your own appointments — a story in which titles rain down from somewhere else and you merely suffer under them. Complain long enough and you will come to believe it. You will have talked yourself out of the one power the verse insists you hold.

CHAPTER FIVE

B'CHOL SHE'ARECHA

THE VERSE ENDS with a location: in all your gates.

Pshat, the gates are the city gates — the places where cases were heard, where a community's judging actually happened. But the word is lecha's cousin: *your* gates, she'arecha. And I find I can't read it anymore without hearing the other gates, the ones each of us staffs alone.

A gate is anywhere something enters and someone decides what it becomes. The morning headline enters through a gate. So does the rebbi's shiur, the mayor's press conference, the neighbor's opinion. And at each gate stands the appointing self, handing out the name tags: this one is a leader, this one is a fraud, this one is my teacher, this one is a fool.

The verse's command, read this way, is not "build a court system." It is: know that appointment is happening at every gate, all the time — so do it deliberately. Titen is not optional; you are already giving titles from morning to night. The only question is whether the giving is awake.

This reframes what teshuva looks like for the chronic complainer — which is to say, for all of us. The work is not to stop having judges and leaders and teachers. Ein melech b'lo am cuts both ways: without the

relation, there is no learning, no community, no din. The seesaw is not a flaw. The work is to stop deleting the titen — to complain, when you must, in the grammar of the verse rather than the grammar of the bystander.

Try the corrected sentence sometime. Not “my leader failed me” but “the man I hold as my leader failed to be what I hold him as.” It’s clumsy. It will never catch on. But say it once and feel what returns to you in the saying: the appointment is back in your hands. You can renew it, revise it, or let it lapse. The one thing you can no longer do is pretend you never made it.

CHAPTER SIX

HOLDING THE PEN

HERE IS WHAT I HOPE you can no longer un-see.

Every title you have ever complained about — leader, teacher, judge, politician — came from a pen, and the pen was in your hand. The complaint was the receipt. You were reading your own handwriting and calling it the weather.

Shoftim v'shotrim titen lecha. Four words, co-arising, with you inside them. The Torah could have said “there shall be judges.” It said instead: you shall give them, to yourself, at your own gates. The verse hands you the pen and never takes it back.

Somewhere today, probably before sundown, a complaint will start forming in your mouth. Some shofeit of yours will have disappointed you; some melech will have embarrassed his am. Let the sentence begin. And then — this is the whole practice — listen for the missing word. Somewhere in that sentence, silent, is titen. Somewhere in it, you are giving the very title you are lamenting.

You don't have to stop the sentence. Just hear the floorboard creak.



That's the shiur. Ein melech b'lo am — and the am is holding the pen.