

## *Shoftim 2017*

Delivered by Rabbi Aaron Krupnick 8/26/17

This week's Torah portion deals with judges, wise elders, and kings, all of whom assume a position of authority in the lives of other people. Underlying this whole first section of our Torah portion is the assumption that people, both individually and collectively, need some sort of authority in their lives who are empowered to tell them what to do. And while it is tempting to take this in a political direction, I won't. Rather, this day, when we celebrate two families blessing their children as they are about to begin their married lives, I'd like to speak of another, in fact more important leadership role in our own lives, namely that of being a parent.

The other day, I was at the bread counter in the market. I asked the woman behind the counter (who it turned out was on her first day of the job) for one ciabatta. She gave me a big smile and confidently said, "Sure - of course!" Then she leaned over to the fellow standing next to her behind the counter and whispered, "What's a ciabatta?!" He pointed at the roll and she confidently gave me one. So I said to her, "You are going to be successful! Get the job first, and figure it out as you go along. Ready, fire, aim!" She gave me an even bigger smile.

And of course I was only thinking like a Jew, or maybe like a Rabbi. When Gd offered the Jewish People the Torah, we famously said, "*Na'aseh V'Nishma*," We will DO, and THEN we will understand. We took on the job before we fully knew how to do it. Parenting, of course, is the highest example of the job we get first, and then figure out how to do afterwards. The baby arrives fully formed and THEN we BEGIN the process of learning how to parent it. There is no rule book, no set of instructions. And we wouldn't want one and only one, even if there was one, because each and every child is different. Parenting is truly much more art than science.

But if we really do think that raising children is more of an art (and I do) then it makes sense to consider what ART is. Art is not a skill. Art is not simply a set of rules. In fact, I'd argue that art is just the opposite. Art is made when the simple and, to others, mundane is appreciated in an artful, meaningful way. Art is the product of someone who, with a discerning eye, emancipates something in the world from its preconceived purpose. Artists most often grab ahold of something everyone else tends to take for granted, and shine a light on that image so that it can be appreciated as a thing of beauty. Simply put, artists see beauty in the world where others simply see... the world.

To my mind, parenting functions in much the same way. As parents we see our children in ways that no one else does, even, and especially, our kids themselves. We see them as filled with beauty of their own sort, talents and abilities, aspects of personality that, when more fully discovered, will help to guide our kids along the path to becoming the people that Gd has meant them to be; the best versions of themselves. That to me is why parenting is so much more art than science. As child psychologist, Alison Gopnik wrote, "We must garden them watchfully; rather than attempt to carpenter them purposefully." We are our children's grow lights, and we hold their watering cans in our own hands.

Not coincidentally, Torah (meaning Jewish life, the spiritual life of Jews) is frequently, and very deliberately, referred to as water; water that sinks into the soil of the soul and helps it to grow.

And that growth is slow; it happens over time. Just like you can't stare at a plant and watch it grow, you can't see the immediate effect that having a religious life and being part of a spiritual community can have on a child; but if you provide the water, something clearly sinks in.

And that is what we celebrate here today: That through artful parenting you have brought your children to this point in their lives. And indeed that process never stops; most great artists painted well into old age. But this day provides you, and everyone who loves your children, the opportunity to appreciate them as you have, as unique and beautiful, each in their own way.