



5785 Divrei Torah on Jerusalem by Rabbi Reuven Schreier Parashat Mishpatim / פרשת משפטים

Citadel of Integrity

“From a matter of falsehood you shall distance yourself, מדבר שקר תרחק” (*Shemot* 23:7). This entire section of *Parshat Mishpatim* constantly emphasizes the need to maintain absolute integrity in judgement. False testimony must be avoided at all costs. A judge must be exceedingly careful to offer righteous and fair verdicts.

The verse of מדבר שקר תרחק is used by *Chazal* to derive many *halachot*. The *Gemara Shevuot* (30b) associates over ten examples of dishonest behavior that the Torah is warning us to avoid. One derivation teaches us that it is prohibited to serve as a judge or witness alongside someone who is a thief or dishonest. The *Gemara Sanhedrin* (23a) explains that this is the reason why we allow two judges to verify the third judge that will preside over the case with them.

The *Gemara* then notes the practice of the נקיי הדעת שבירושלים (literally, those of clean thought), the scrupulous people of Jerusalem. These righteous individuals were exceedingly careful to never mingle in judgement or testimony with those who were unscrupulous. This *Gemara* initially seems strange. The title “נקיי הדעת” implies an extreme level of integrity that surpasses the common standards of society. But it sounds as if the Scrupulous People of Jerusalem were simply fulfilling the *mitzvah* that is incumbent upon everyone in *Klal Yisrael*. What makes them so special?

The *Rambam's* codification of this *halacha* (*Hilchot Sanhedrin* 22:10) reveals the answer to this question. The *Rambam* relays that it is only prohibited to adjudicate a case alongside a judge who one knows to be a thief. Hence, one only transgresses the *mitzvah* of מדבר שקר תרחק when he is aware of the dishonesty of his colleague. However, the נקיי הדעת transcended this level, opting to investigate all parties involved in their testimony and judgements to ensure that they never came near falsehood. (See *Aruch HaShulchan, Choshen Mishpat* 3:7 and other commentaries to the *Tur* for a more complete discussion of the *Rambam's* position.)

These *tzaddikim* were not simply clean from sin and dishonesty. The language of נקי, cleanliness and purity, connotes a fine sensitivity for truth and holiness (see *Mesilat Yesharim* chapter 10). Their elevated standard of conduct was a natural extension of a deep sense of morality that penetrated past the letter of the law. For them, it was not enough to avoid deliberate engagement with falsehood; the Torah's exhortation of תרחק made falsehood appear as a dangerous and noxious poison. When one acutely feels the toxic stench of שקר, there is no such thing as excessive distance.

This higher standard of integrity established by the sages of Jerusalem is incumbent upon all Torah scholars. The *Rambam* (*Sanhedrin* 2:14) explains that it is prohibited for anyone who is deemed a חכם to settle for the lower standards expected of the general populace. Jerusalem's elevated conduct sets the bar for all those who seek wisdom.



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It is not a coincidence that the נקיי הדעת hailed from *Yerushalayim Ir HaKodesh*. First, as the *Neshama* of *Eretz Yisrael*, Jerusalem demands a higher level of conduct that transcends the normal expectations of mortal society. As *David HaMelech* writes (*Tehillim* 24:3-4), "Who will ascend upon the Lord's mountain and who will stand in His Holy place? He who has clean hands and a pure heart..." The Scrupulous Ones were sensitive to this spiritual obligation and responded in kind. But more importantly, Jerusalem's rarefied and holy air inculcates a higher degree of purity and virtue. For those who are worthy, life in Jerusalem facilitates נקיות and קדושה.

