

Contagious Stupidity (Shoftim)

As favor and riches forsake a man, we discover in him the foolishness they concealed, and which no one perceived before. -Jean De La Bruyere

Stupidity is contagious, and it stems from arrogance. At least that is what Rabbi Shlomo Ephraim of Prague, the Kli Yakar (1550-1619), argues. He is so concerned about people becoming infected with the disease of stupidity that he even prescribes that one should be careful where one lives so as not to catch it. The criteria he gives for determining the suitability of one's domicile is the character of the judge of the town. The Kli Yakar on Deuteronomy Chapter 16 explains that if the judge is arrogant, even the wisest scholar will fall prey to foolishness, just by association.

Arrogance leads to thinking one knows it all or is always right in their opinions. That of course leads to foolishness, for even King Solomon the Wise fell most disastrously relying on his own council. The Kli Yakar's greater concern is the infectiousness of incorrect thinking. If a judge or a leader, or any other great and wise person, takes on the attribute of arrogance, it inevitably leads to faulty judgment. People around these leaders, who look up to them, admire them and see them as role models, may also exercise poor judgment. Entire communities may crop up with an error in their thinking and life – all based on one arrogant wise man whose foolishness may doom generations.

May God spare us the arrogance of the wise and keep us near the humble of any stature.

Shabbat Shalom,

Ben-Tzion

Dedication

In memory of Hersh Goldberg-Polin hy”d, amongst all the other victims of Hamas. May God comfort the families, amongst all the mourners of Zion and Jerusalem.