

Parashah Shoftim, one of the shortest parashiot, but one of the most compact, is concerned with establishing mechanisms for forming and maintaining a healthy society grounded in empathy and justice for all. The spheres of judicial authority, monarchy, priesthood, and prophecy are explicitly defined in order to create a system of checks and balances designed to restrict the possibility of exploitation. It looks wonderful on paper but implementing this concept in the many forms it has taken since then is an eternal challenge.

“*tzedek, tzedek tirdof* – justice, justice shall you pursue ...” Whenever a word is repeated in our scriptures, it carries particular significance. Parashah Shoftim, which coincides with the beginning of Elul, offers a number of explanations for the repetition of this particular word. Elul, the final month of our liturgical year, is the month during which we take stock of our actions during the past 11 months. Like housecleaning before Pesach, it can be overwhelming, or it can be a welcome journey into those hidden places we’ve overlooked in the course of our daily, weekly, and monthly housekeeping. We all know that the longer we procrastinate, the more daunting a task becomes. This is true collectively as well as individually. Small deficits left unchecked mushroom into insurmountable problems, causing groups, nations, and entire civilizations to deteriorate for lack of vigilance. It is noteworthy that once again, commands are in the singular form, stressing the fact that the health of the whole is contingent upon the actions of its individual members.

If we view the repetition of the word *justice* in this light, we can infer that the first repetition is directed to each of us individually, and the second to us all as a group. In order to judge others fairly, we must be able to judge ourselves fairly. That not only means that we must honestly acknowledge our failings and strive to make amends, it also requires that we not judge ourselves so harshly that we become disillusioned. Here too, a healthy balance is important. In the introduction to the Yom Kippur confessional, we admit that we are not so brazen as to call ourselves *tzadikim* (those few individuals who are as faultless as humans can be), but by the same token few, *baruch HaShem*, are *rashim* (thoroughly wicked). We are *benoni*, people of the middle – fallible, but able to keep the scales in balance.

Our parashah discusses many aspects of justice. One of the most striking is the command that a newly crowned king write for himself two copies of “this Torah on a scroll from [that scroll which is] before the Levitic kohanim.” What is “this Torah,” and why two copies? “This Torah” could refer to the restrictions placed upon kings, who ideally should never have existed, but because our ancestors did not live in a vacuum, eventually became a necessity. In addition to observing the rest of the Torah, a king must pay particular attention to his possessions and how he regards them. He must not acquire too many horses, too many wives, or too much money, lest he become haughty and feel he is above the law. The warning not to return to Egypt to acquire horses is paramount: We have put the narrows of *Mitzrayim* behind us and we must not return; our freedom provides us with healthier restrictions. Not acquiring too many wives guards against outside influence – i.e. the king’s heart should be directed toward his people. And acquiring too much money leads to another form of self-indulgence that could make him forget his duties. But why two copies? Or is it really two copies after all? The Hebrew is a bit ambiguous. The Talmud (Sanhedrin 21b) discusses this and concludes that there are indeed two, with one scroll to accompany the king everywhere (except when he goes into the bathhouse or to the toilet) so he may consult it at all times, and one to be deposited in his treasury. Were they already worried that a king could justify his actions by altering his personal copy? Having another copy for comparison would eliminate this possibility. Viewed against today’s backdrop of media influence and fake news, this injunction is particularly timely.

Manipulating information has always been easy for those in power. Our ancestors understood this temptation and put measures in place to guard against it. Sadly, as we know, it is an ongoing challenge and seldom successful. As we progress through the month of Elul to Rosh HaShanah, may we be aware of the many ways we have succumbed to our urges, caused harm and then justified it by tweaking the facts; but may we equally remember the many times we have successfully resisted temptation and done the right thing. The measure of the justice we direct to ourselves determines the measure of our justice toward our world. “Justice, justice shall you pursue, that you may live ...” The merits of our *tzadikim* are grounded in justice directed inward as well as outward. We would do well to imitate them, but only to the best of our own abilities – no more, and no less – so that we may live in harmony with ourselves and with our world.

Shabbat shalom!