

Our parashah, one of the shortest and one of the most compact parsahiot, deals with mechanisms for forming and maintaining a healthy society grounded in empathy and justice. The spheres of judicial authority, monarchy, priesthood, and prophesy are explicitly outlined, creating a system of checks and balances designed to restrict the possibility of exploitation. We all know the words *tzedek, tzedek tirdof* – justice, justice shall you pursue (16:20). Repeating a word denotes particular significance, and this repetition, coming at the end of the first week of month of Elul, can be understood as first a personal, and then, a collective wake-up call. Elul is the final month of our liturgical year, the month in which we are called upon to take stock of our actions during the past 11 months. Like housecleaning before Pesach, it is either overwhelming, or it simply reveals the places we have overlooked in our daily, weekly, and monthly housekeeping work. If we have procrastinated, or have been careless, the task will be enormous. This is true collectively as well as individually. Small, unchecked deficits will grow into insurmountable problems, causing groups, nations, and entire civilizations to deteriorate. It is noteworthy that paralleling the integral parts of the *shema Yisrael*, commands are in the singular form, because the health of the whole is contingent upon the actions of the individual. In this light, we can apply the first iteration of *tzedek* to ourselves, and the second to us collectively. Judging others fairly hinges upon the ability to judge ourselves fairly. But here, we must proceed with great caution. We are required to genuinely acknowledge our failings and strive to make amends, but we are not permitted to judge ourselves so harshly that repentance and change are impossible. In other words, there is no room for narcissism, or for false humility, which is actually just another facet of narcissism. This is best illustrated by the wonderful story attributed to the 18th century Chasidic Rebbe Simcha Bunem of Peshischa: He taught that everyone should have a slip of paper in each pocket. Written on one should be the Talmudic quote, ‘for my sake the world was created,’ (Mishna Sanhedrin 4:5) and on the other Abraham’s, ‘I am but dust and ashes.’ (Genesis 18:27). The goal is to have the wisdom to know which slip of paper to read at the right time. Some people carry little wooden coins inscribed with these quotes. I think that the actual goal is to maintain a healthy balance between these two extremes. This is especially important when we try to process one of the most unsavory passages in our Torah: Chapter 20:10-20, which echoes the narrative of the war against Midian (Numbers, Chapter 31) Despite the opening verses (20:10-12) that mandate first proposing peace, and the final two verses, which forbid destroying food trees, we are justifiably repelled by the wholesale brutality the Israelites are to employ against those Canaanites who refuse to make peace. Do we really value trees more than we value human beings who do not live by our values? Is genocide ever permissible? Apologists stress the necessity of removing any vestige of temptation Canaanite culture poses for the Israelites. Modern scholarship cites the slim archeological evidence of widespread annihilation of Canaanite cities, which is corroborated in the narratives in Joshua, Judges, and Kings. Detractors, especially those engaging in the pernicious form of anti-Semitism clothed in righteous wrath against Israel’s policies toward the Palestinians, see a continuation of Jewish elitism and intolerance. And the specter of the Shoah haunts both of Reb Bunem’s slips of paper. How do we, with our 21st century sensitivities, navigate these dangerous waters with integrity? If we tilt the scales toward the Talmudic quote, we can blithely ascribe the excesses against the Canaanites to the prevailing culture of the times, and point out the unusually humanitarian practices of the Israelites, especially regarding the women and children who are permitted to remain alive. If we favor Abraham’s self-effacing statement, we risk castigating ourselves for sins we did not commit, engaging in a spiral of collective shame that offers neither escape nor remedy. We see this playing out today in many parts of our increasingly polarized world, with some groups indulging in ostentatious demonstrations of remorse and others clamoring for revenge, and both sides reviling each other in the name of justice. How did we get into this mess, and will we ever manage emerge and live in peace? It is a serious question, and there are no answers in sight. As both the Chofetz Chaim and Leo Tolstoy concluded after unsuccessfully trying to change the world, we first have to change ourselves. It is easy to fault others, and just as easy to wallow in self-deprecation. But both extremes are dead-end streets. Our Yom Kippur liturgy offers us a beautiful and simple solution: In the introduction to the confessional, which we repeat multiple times, we admit that we are not so brazen as to call ourselves *tzadikim* (those few individuals who are as faultless as any human being can be); we can, and do make mistakes, as the litany of possible missteps we recite richly illustrates. And if we truly repent, we are forgiven. And few of us, baruch HaShem, are *rashim* (thoroughly evil). We are simply *benoni* – people of the middle, fallible, but able to keep the scales in balance by acknowledging our shortcomings, seeking to make amends, and resolving to do better in the future. As we continually work to improve ourselves by honestly evaluating our behavior and making the necessary corrections, we become better able to work together toward building a better world. Indeed, we mortals are dust and ashes. Our goal is to do our best to spend our precious lives in pursuit of justice in this world that was created for us.

Shabbat shalom!