

Rosh Chodesh Elul, which this year immediately precedes Shabbat, is a significant date for many reasons. First of all, it is the New Year of the Animals, the day for tithing cattle: “Any tithe of cattle or flock of all that pass under the rod, the tenth shall be holy to the Lord.” (Leviticus 27:32) Mishna 1 in Talmud Tractate Rosh HaShanah 2a discusses: “There are four days in the year that serve as the New Year, each for a different purpose. ... On the first of Elul is the New Year for animal tithes. ... Rabbi Elazar and Rabbi Shimon say: ‘The New Year for animal tithes is the first of Tishrei.’ On the first of Tishrei is the New year for counting years, ...”, i.e., the first month of the civic calendar. Since few of us have any direct connection to livestock farming, and the original purpose ended with the destruction of the Temple, *l’ma’asar behemah* or *rosh hashanah labehemot* has lost its significance. But as my friend and fellow dog parent Rabbi Jonathan Wittenberg aptly suggests, reframed in light of our growing concern for the environment and the welfare of animals, it could now be “about seeing the sacred in all living beings and understanding our own place in an immense and intricate material and spiritual ecology.” [Jewish Chronicle, Aug. 12, 2015] Elul is definitely about seeing the sacred, since it is the month of intense spiritual preparation for the High Holy Days. The letters אָלוּל (Elul) are in fact, an acronym for “*ani le’dodi ve’dodi li* I am my beloved’s and my beloved is mine.” (Song of Songs 6:3), with the “beloved” referring to our close relationship with HaShem. We begin to read Psalm 27, this eloquent expression of both trust in, and yearning for HaShem. (a topic for another day) And the shofar is blown every morning (except on Shabbat) beginning with the second day of Rosh Chodesh Elul and continuing until the day before Erev Rosh Chodesh Tishrei – our wake-up call to do the important work of *teshuvah*, of reviewing our behavior, acknowledging our shortcomings, making amends, and resolving to do better in the future. So it is no coincidence that Parashah Shoftim falls at the beginning of Elul. Its opening two verses (16:18-19) encapsulate the basic requirements for building a healthy society based on equal justice for all, and the third distills the first two into one succinct commandment: “Justice, justice shall you pursue ...” (16:20) Repeating a word is always significant, because it not only focuses our attention, it may also indicate two different aspects of the repeated word. Indeed, there is both good and bad justice, and we must diligently seek out the difference and act accordingly. As we read in Leviticus 19:15, “You shall commit no injustice in judgment; you shall not favor a poor person or show deference to a great man; you shall judge your fellow with righteousness.” Verse 19 of our parashah defines this further: “You shall not pervert justice; you shall not show favoritism, and you shall not take a bribe, for bribery blinds the eyes of the wise and perverts just words.” It is a shameful fact that the rich and powerful often enjoy favorable treatment, sometimes because they have the means to bribe the court. The controversy surrounding two justices on the US Supreme Court is a case in point. But we have also seen the equally tragic results of systems that promote the reverse. “Justice, justice” calls for scrupulous impartiality. The Chasidic rabbi Simcha Bunim of Pshischa taught that the repetition of the word “justice” means that we must pursue justice with justice, not through bribery or falsification. The end must never justify the means. There are no “alternative facts,” no matter how convincingly they are presented. Conversely, Rabbi Ze’ev of Zbarzh interpreted the repetition as a warning against unjustified righteousness, i.e., acting with an attitude of moral superiority. This could also include the excessive pursuit of justice in the name of revenge, as we learn from the reiteration of the commandment to establish three cities of refuge for those who unintentionally kill someone. The repetition also alludes to the commandment that future kings write “two copies of this Torah on a scroll from that scroll which is before the Levitic kohanim.” (17:18) “This Torah” could refer to the restrictions placed upon future kings, who ideally should never even have existed. In addition to observing the rest of the Torah, a king must pay particular attention to his possessions and how they may influence him. Talmud Tractate Sanhedrin 21b discusses the need for two copies, with one scroll to accompany the king everywhere (except when he goes into the bathhouse or the toilet) so he may consult it at all times, and one to be deposited in his treasury. Having another copy stored in the treasury would obviously deter a king from altering his personal copy to justify his actions, something we can readily understand today. Finally, applying the principle of repetition to *teshuvah*, we can infer that the first iteration is directed to us individually, and the second to us collectively. In order to judge others fairly, we must first be able to judge ourselves fairly, which means that we must genuinely acknowledge our failings and strive to make amends, but without judging ourselves so harshly that we become cynical or overbearing. Remembering Simcha Bunim’s famous advice to carry a slip of paper inscribed on one side with “for my sake the world was created,” and on the other with “I am but dust and ashes,” we realize that we are neither *tzadikim* (as faultless as a human can be), nor *rashim* (thoroughly evil). We are *benoni*, people of the middle – human, fallible, and thus commanded to judge ourselves and others with righteous judgment.

Shabbat shalom!