

Parashat Shoftim

Devarim 16:18-17:13

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u'masha lieba**

YOUR PARASHAH: <https://www.sefaria.org/Deuteronomy.15-13?lang=bi>

Summary

The Torah portion this week is *Shoftim*--which means “judges” or legal authorities. It begins with verse 18 of the 16th chapter of *Sefer Devarim*, the Book of Deuteronomy.

In this week’s *parasha*, Moshe continues his final speech to the Israelites. He speaks to the Israelites about legal, political, religious, and military leadership, telling the Israelites to establish courts of law in every city and to uphold high ethical standards. Moshe informs them that they should appoint judges to judge the people according to the facts of the cases presented. Judges must not twist their judgments to favor or not to favor someone whom they recognize. Further, judges must not accept money to decide cases in favor of one side or the other.

Parashat Shoftim also includes the *mitzvah* of *bal tashcheet*--the law against senseless waste or destruction. We are directed to not cut down the fruit trees of the people we fight in a war. In this week’s *parasha*, Moshe once again sets very clear and high expectations for the Israelites’ behavior when they enter the Promised Land.

The final verse I will read today translates to, “Justice, justice shall you pursue, so that you may live and take possession of the land which God, your God, is giving you.” Listen for the Hebrew word *tzedek*, translated as “justice”, it shares a *shoresh* or “root” with the word “*tzedakah*” the money we collect and give to try to create more justice in the world.

Questions

1) In the second verse that I read this morning, the Torah tells us: לא תטה משפט The literal translation of that is, “Do not lean judgement”. What does it mean for a judge to “lean judgement”? <<pick 3>>

If a judge is “leaning judgement”, I think that means that the judge is unfairly using his or her power in court to favor one person over the other. Justice is supposed to be straight, meaning it should be clear to others how a judge reaches a decision. A sign used for justice is a balanced scale, symbolizing equality and fairness. “Leaning judgement” could mean that the judge leans the scale to one side on purpose. A judge might do this by deciding a case in a way that actually benefits the judge instead of making a decision that is fair and true justice.

2) In Leviticus 19:15, the Torah tells us, “Do not favor the poor or show deference to the rich,” meaning we shouldn’t favor the rich or poor. Why do you think that the Torah would tell us that we should not favor the rich or the poor? <<pick 3>>

The Torah is teaching us that we are all people and people shouldn’t be treated more or less fairly because they are poor or rich. Everyone should be seen as innocent until proven guilty.

3) Later on in the verse, the Torah teaches us that the judge should not “recognize faces.” What might this mean for a judge? How does this rule protect people? <<pick 3>>

“Don’t recognize faces” is teaching the judge not to have personal conversations with people involved in a court case when they are in “court” because these conversations might make the judge lean to one side or the other in the way they judge a case. A judge has to listen equally to both sides to determine the facts of the case--not because the judge knows one person better or cares about someone more. One sign for justice is a scale that is even and not leaning. <<show picture>> Lady Justice, a figure who represents justice, is holding an even scale and wearing a blindfold. I think she is wearing a blindfold to show that a judge should only listen to the facts and not recognize faces or make assumptions about a person based on how the person looks.