

SUMMARY

Shoftim--which means “judges” or legal authorities begins with verse 18 of the 16th chapter of *Sefer Devarim*, the Book of Deuteronomy.

Moshe continues talking to the Israelites--about legal, political, religious, and military leadership, telling them to create courts of law in every city and to uphold high ethical standards. Moshe tells them to 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 told to not cut down the fruit trees of people we fight in a war. Moshe once again sets very clear and high expectations for the Israelites’ behavior when they enter the Promised Land.

One verses we read translates to, “Justice, justice shall you pursue, so that you may live and take possession of the land which G!d, your G!d, is giving you.” Our *parasha* talks a lot about how we can make and enforce laws to help ensure that everyone gets what they need to live when we enter the Land of Israel.



1) The second verse of the *parasha* says:

לֹא־תִטֶּה מִשְׁפָּט לֹא תִבִיר פָּנִים

Do not lean a judgement; do not recognize faces.

If two people walked into a courtroom for a judge's help and the judge recognized one of the people why might that be a problem?

JORDYN: I think it would be a problem for a judge to know one of the people involved in a case because if the judge recognizes you, and knows you really well, then she or he might have in mind everything you've ever done wrong and hold it against you.

NOAM: I think it would be a problem for a judge to know one of the people involved in a case or to be friendly with one of the people, because it might make the other person feel bad and they might be less likely to talk and to share important information about the case.

2) This verse continues. . .

וְלֹא־תִקַּח שֹׁחַד כִּי הַשְׁחָד יְעוֹר עֵינֵי הַחֲכָמִים

Do not take a bribe, for a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise.

How might taking a bribe make it difficult for a wise person to see?

NOAM: If a judge accepts a bribe one time then it might be easier for her or him to take a bribe the next time, and when judges get used to receiving bribes, they will be blind to the facts of the cases because they will be thinking more about money than about cases.

JORDYN: If people feel like they need to bribe the judges, then people--particularly poor people who don't have as much money to pay the judges--might be less likely to bring court cases even if they are wise and know that they have a good case.

3) The next verse says,

צְדָקָה צְדָקָה תִּרְדֹּף לְמַעַן תַּחֲיֶה

וַיִּרְשֶׁתָּ אֶת־הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר־הָ"א--לְהֵיךָ בְּתוֹךְ לְךָ

Justice, justice you are to pursue, in order that you may live in and inherit the land that A-donai your G-d gives you.

In order for the Israelites to keep the land that G-d has promised them they must set up a fair legal system and treat people appropriately. Why might G-d tell us that treating people unfairly could lead to losing our land?

JORDYN: When a court system doesn't work right, a country will have a lot of problems. It will be hard for people to trust each other. If there are no consequences for treating people badly, then no one will want to live there.

NOAM: Yes! When a country does not pursue justice, people in other countries will lose their trust in that country and not want to do business with them. It is important to speak up when you see someone do something bad, and it is important that a country can deal with this.