

Rabbi Joshua Samuels  
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Parashat Shofetim

### **Justice, Justice Shall You Pursue.**

One of, or arguably the most important instruction we receive from the Torah is about pursuing justice. In this week's parasha, Shofetim, Moses speaks to the Israelites with conviction, saying, "*Tzedek tzedek tirdof* (Justice, justice you shall pursue)."

This noble vision, though understood in its context to be an injunction affecting the courts and public policy, we learn, should also be understood as a highly personal commandment, affecting each individual.

Now, the Hebrew word for justice is *tzedek* and many words are derived from this root, including *tzedakah*, righteous action. The title *tzadik* is given to one whose life exemplifies the values of *tzedek* and *tzedakah*. So by actively pursuing justice in our lives, we become closer to taking on the title of *tzadik*, or righteous one.

One reason we know this instruction to be of utmost importance is due to the repetition of the word *tzedek*. Moses does not just say, "Pursue justice everyone." But he says, "Justice, justice, you shall pursue." In case you didn't hear me the first time, hear me now. Much like the sounding of shofar during the month of Elul which serves as a wake-up call to us to begin the process of *teshuva*, the repetition of the word *tzedek* is intended to wake us from our daily routines so that we may bring righteousness, integrity and fairness to the world, and at the very least, into our own lives.

This is not easy to do. The prophets from thousands of years ago have been encouraging us to do this every year, all year. To them justice and compassion were at the essence of Judaism. As Rabbi Bradley Shavit Artson writes, "This (justice) is the primary Jewish contribution to the human spirit." Moses' charge reminds us that justice is an eternal religious obligation, at the very core of what it means to be a Jew.

One could even say that this command, to pursue justice, is even more important than observing Jewish rituals. Midrash Devarim Rabbah states, "To do righteousness and justice is more acceptable to God than sacrifice (Proverbs 21:3). It does not say 'As much as sacrifice' but 'more than sacrifice.'"

The midrash then goes on at length to explain the many ways in which justice is superior to sacrifice (or ritual) in the sight of God. The one I prefer states that whereas sacrifices are offered only by humanity, even God is obligated to practice justice and righteousness.

Justice seems to be the ultimate Jewish ritual. During this month of Elul, leading up to the High Holy Days, let's ask ourselves how we can pursue justice in our lives and hopefully in the lives of others. And pursuing justice is not only incumbent on each individual but also

to the community. So, I ask you to also think of ways we as Beth Israel can heed this mitzvah in the coming year.

Last year I led a workshop titled "Justice and Politics in the Synagogue." What we learned is that one cannot compartmentalize the two when engaging in social action. Politics enters nearly every realm of communal life. We are not simply a community that gathers to pray, after all.

A few months ago the Social Action committee sent a survey to the congregation asking which issues are most important to you. The majority responded with Health Care. This year we are going to try and figure out what angle to take with this. We will attempt to bring speakers to talk about various issues surrounding Health Care Reform. But this does not have to be the only topic we discuss. I am sure there are plenty of issues which keep you up at night and our responsibility as Jews is to listen and then take steps to alleviate any injustices we see.

Tomorrow, Ben is going to talk about an issue that is meaningful to him and one which I know he will fight for in his lifetime. Ben is certainly on his way to becoming an *ish tzaddik*, a righteous man.

I hope this Shabbat is one filled with peace and happiness as well as reflection as we are in the month of Elul. But I also hope that this Shabbat fills you with the spirit to pursue justice, both within our community and abroad.

K'siva V'Chasima Tova. May we all be inscribed for a good year!