

Parasha Shoftim (Judges): The Hebrew Link Between Justice and Righteousness



“Follow justice [tzedeq] and justice alone, so that you may live and possess the land the LORD your God is giving you.” (Deuteronomy 16:20)

Parasha Shoftim (Judges) 5778

Deuteronomy 16:18–21:9; Isaiah 51:12–52:12; John 1:19–27

“Appoint judges [**shoftim**] and officials for each of your tribes in every town the Lord your God is giving you, and they shall judge [**shafat**] the people fairly [righteous judgment].” (Deuteronomy 16:18)

“Follow justice (**tzedeq**) and justice alone, so that you may live and possess the land the LORD your God is giving you.” (Deuteronomy 16:20)

Last week, in Parasha Re’eh, we read that Moses told the Israelites that God had set a blessing and a curse before them. The blessing would come when they obeyed God’s commandments, and the curse if they forsook them.

This week, Parasha Shoftim opens with the Biblical concepts of judges, righteous judgment and justice.

The very first word of the Parasha reading is shoftim (judges), which is derived from the word shafat (to judge or to govern).

To emphasize the theme of justice, the Hebrew word **tzedek** (justice) is repeated twice in verse 20:

“Follow justice and justice alone [**tzedek tzedek tirdof** / justice justice pursue], so that you may live and possess the land the Lord [YHVH] your God is giving you.” (*Deuteronomy 16:20*)

In Hebrew, justice (**tzedek**) is closely tied to the idea of righteousness and holiness.

In fact, the words righteous (**tzadik**) and charity (**tzedakah**) are related to justice (**tzedek**).

It only follows, then, that God, who is holy and righteous, is also just.

He is called the Lord our Righteousness (**YHVH Tzidkenu**), the Righteous God (**Elohim Tzadik**), and Righteous Judge (**Shofat Tzadik**).

The prophet Isaiah declared, “But the Lord Almighty will be exalted by His justice [**mishpat**], and the holy God will show Himself holy by His righteousness[**tzedakah**].” (*Isaiah 5:16*)

Justice is the foundation of the Torah’s humane legislation. God also requires that Israel be characterized by righteousness, integrity, and charity.

“When the righteous [**tzadikim**] thrive, the people rejoice; when the wicked rule, the people groan.” (*Proverbs 29:2*)

Where there is no justice, there is no appreciation of the right of every human being to be treated with fairness, respect, and kindness.

Those who oppress, mistreat, or take advantage of others—especially orphans, widows and strangers—are the enemies of God and man (*see Exodus 22:22–24; Deuteronomy 14:29, 24:19–21, 26:12–13, 27:19; Isaiah 1:17; James 1:22, 27; 1 John 3:16–18; etc.*).

What Is the End Result of Justice and Righteousness?

Peace (shalom) and security!

The fruit of righteousness [**tzedakah**] will be peace; the effect of righteousness [**tzedakah**] will be quietness and confidence forever." (*Isaiah 32:17*)

We can see why it's so important that everyone in a position of authority needs to be righteous and just, including our government leaders and officials, bosses, teachers and even fathers and mothers.

A Kingly Model of Justice

In his farewell message to the nation of Israel, Moses addressed the subject of authority.

He prophesied that Israel would ask for a king to rule over them in the Promised Land:

"When you enter the land the Lord your God is giving you and have taken possession of it and settled in it, and you say, 'Let us set a king over us like all the nations around us,' be sure to appoint over you the king the Lord your God chooses. He must be from among your own brothers. Do not appoint a foreigner over you, one who is not a brother Israelite.'" (*Deuteronomy 17:14–15*)

As Moses predicted, after almost four centuries in the Land, the people of Israel demanded a king.

Both God and Samuel the prophet were displeased with their request, regarding it as a rejection of the reign of God over Israel.

"Listen to the voice of the people according to all that they say to you for they have not rejected you but they have rejected Me from reigning over them." (*1 Samuel 8:7*)

The problem wasn't that Israel wanted a king; Moses had prophesied that they would have a king over them in the Land. It was the way they asked and the motivation behind the request.

They told Samuel, "Now appoint a king to lead us, such as all the other nations have." (*1 Samuel 8:5*)

God never intended for Israel to be ruled by a king like the ones found in the pagan nations. The king of Israel was to be a model of justice and righteousness—an example for the rest of the nations to follow.

Yeshua: Model of Servant-Leadership

The ideal Jewish king or leader is unique among the nations.

He's a servant-leader that is scholarly, pious, righteous and God-fearing. He's someone who encourages the Jewish People to fulfill their mission to be a light to the nations.

Yeshua (Jesus) perfectly modeled servant-leadership. He also trained His disciples in this style of leadership:

“You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first among you must be your slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many.” (*Matthew 20:25–28*)

Yeshua is the eternal King of Israel who rules and reigns on the throne of David in righteous judgment and justice.

When Isaiah prophesied about the Messiah, he wrote that “a child would be born, a Son given, and the government would be upon His shoulders... of the increase of His government and peace [shalom] there will be no end, upon the throne of David and over His kingdom, to order it and establish it with judgment [**mishpat**]and justice [**tzedakah**].” (*Isaiah 9:6–7*)

And in all our leadership roles, we are to follow His example of ruling or governing.

The Hebrew language itself also reveals that God intends those in positions of authority to be examples for others to emulate.

For instance, the Hebrew word for government is **memshalah**, which is related to the word **mashal** (to rule or to govern). **Mashal** comes from the Hebrew

root **m-sh-l**, meaning to be like or to compare and, therefore, carries the connotation of example.

When Yeshua washed His disciples' feet, He showed us a beautiful example of how we should both serve and lead others:

“Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you.” (*John 13:14–15*)

A leader must possess a combination of strength and humility. He must be able to get the job done without bullying and to exercise compassion without belittling.

King David: Model of Righteous Authority

King David was also an example of righteous authority.

David was God's anointed one, a type of the Messiah. (In Hebrew, the word Messiah is **Mashiach**, which means anointed one.)

God set David on the throne when He removed Saul as king of Israel because of his disobedience. God chose David because he was a man after His heart who would rule Israel with righteousness and justice.

That's not to say that David was a perfect man; as we all know, he took another man's wife (Bathsheba) and then positioned her husband (Uriah) to be killed in battle.

Despite this brazen sin, David was also a God-fearing, humble man, and he did repent of this terrible transgression when Nathan the Prophet confronted him.

This quality is essential to righteous authority—a willingness to listen to a godly rebuke, and to repent and turn back to God.

The Gold Standard of Leadership

Parasha Shoftim details the appropriate behaviour of a king of Israel.

The king wasn't to gather for himself a bevy of beauties or piles of money.

Instead, he was to treasure the Book of the Law (Torah) and diligently read it. He was to fear the Lord and keep His laws and statutes.

“Only he *the king+ shall not have too many horses for himself... And he shall not have too many wives... and he shall not greatly increase silver and gold for himself.... It shall be that when he sits on the throne of his kingdom, he shall write for himself two copies of this Torah... It shall be with him, and he shall read from it all the days of his life, so that he will learn to fear the Lord, his God, to keep all the words of the Torah... so that his heart does not become haughty over his brethren.” (*Deuteronomy 17:16–20*)

According to the Talmud (oral tradition), the king of Israel possessed two copies of the Torah: one that he kept in his private collection and one that he carried with him.

Today, 3,000 years later, the Bible still guides leaders in wise decisions.

In fact, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu revived a weekly Bible study session in his official residence for national and religious leaders, a practice initially started by the first Prime Minister, David Ben-Gurion.

Holding the Torah in his hand, Netanyahu told the first group:

“I think in many ways it’s a parable for humanity because if the Jewish people were able through this vast odyssey in time to ford all the rivers, to cross the chasm of annihilation, and to come back to our ancestral homeland, to rebuild our lives, this means there’s hope for all humanity.” (*CBN News*)

Netanyahu is not the only leader to treasure Scripture.

When British monarchs are crowned, they are presented with a Bible along with the words, “We present you with this Book, the most valuable thing the world affords. Here is wisdom; this is the royal law; these are the living oracles of God.”

Pray for Those in Authority

“Therefore I exhort first of all that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks be made for all men, for kings and all who are in authority,

that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and reverence.” (1 Timothy 2:1–2)

We need to pray that our government leaders and those in authority over us are wise, just, and righteous so that we may live in shalom (peace).

People in positions of power make mistakes that can have devastating consequences on the people they govern.

In the book of Exodus, we see a perfect example of this in the Pharaoh of Egypt.

All the Egyptians, even innocent men, women, and children suffered because of the hardness and stubbornness of Pharaoh’s heart.

Although people in positions of leadership and authority often have more privileges than the common man, they also carry greater responsibility. The greater a person’s position, the higher the standard required.

The book of James reveals that even teachers will be judged more harshly than others (*James 3:1*).

The smallest mistakes of our great Jewish leaders were severely punished.

Even Moses himself did not enter the Land because he struck the rock instead of speaking to it as God commanded.

King Solomon (Shlomo) understood this well. And because he did, he fervently prayed to God for the wisdom to discern right from wrong in judging Israel (*1 Kings 3:9*).

Shlomo asked God for a **lev shome’ah**, which literally means a heart that hears:

“So give your servant a discerning heart [**lev shome'ah**] to govern [**shafat** / judge] your people and to distinguish between right and wrong. For who is able to govern [**shafat**] this people of yours?” (*1 Kings 3:9*)

Despite all the wisdom God gave to Solomon, his downfall was that he didn’t listen to the word of the Torah that forbids many wives (*Deuteronomy 17:17*).

In the end, King Solomon's many foreign wives turned his heart away from the Lord to serve their foreign gods.

In order to make righteous judgments about people and situations in our life, we need to have a heart that both hears from God and is willing to submit to the Word of God.

Judging Others

Judgment is a strong theme running through Parasha Shoftim.

In the Brit Chadashah (New Covenant), Yeshua (Jesus) also spoke about judgment. He cautioned, "Judge not, lest you be judged." (*Matthew 7:1*)

Does this mean that we're never to make any kind of judgment about anything or anyone?

No. Yeshua warned us to judge fairly, without hypocrisy and to examine ourselves first.

There's a righteous kind of judgment that we're expected to exercise carefully: "Do not judge according to appearance but judge with righteous judgment." (*John 7:24*)

In the end, however, God alone is perfectly righteous and just. Only He can achieve that flawless balance between justice and mercy.

"Surely the righteous [**tzadik**] still are rewarded; surely there is a God who judges [**shafat**] the earth." (*Psalms 58:11*)

We can be eternally grateful that through Yeshua's death on the execution stake, we've escaped the judgment we so rightly deserve. Hallelujah!

We can be thankful, that in Yeshua, mercy triumphs over judgment (*James 2:13*).

"But He was pierced for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on Him, and by His wounds we are healed." (*Isaiah 53:5*)