

Parshat Shoftim: Justice, A Theme of Shabbat and of the High Holidays Meditation by Rabbi Debra Orenstein

Justice is a salient theme on the High Holidays. Another name for Rosh Hashanah is “The Day of Judgment.” God is imagined throughout the High Holiday liturgy as a Judge. And we judge ourselves, reviewing and assessing our actions and inactions of the past year. *Lehitpallel*, “to pray” in Hebrew, literally means “to judge oneself.” On High Holidays, that literal meaning occupies our attention.

The Haftarah reading for Yom Kippur from Isaiah 57-58 cries out for justice: “This is My chosen fast: loosen all the bonds that bind unfairly, let the oppressed go free, break every yoke. Share your bread with the hungry, take the homeless into your home. Clothe the naked and do not turn away from people in need.”

It may be less obvious to many contemporary Jews that justice is also a theme of Shabbat. However, the Torah makes that point unmistakably in Moses’ repetition of the Ten Commandments:

You shall not do any manner of work – neither you, nor your son, nor your daughter, nor your man-servant, nor your maid-servant, nor your ox, nor your donkey, nor any of your cattle, nor the stranger who is within your gates – so that your workers may rest, just like you. –
Deuteronomy 5:13

In *Shoftim*, the first Torah portion of Elul, the theme – explicitly and repeatedly – is justice. The Hebrew word *shoftim* means “judges,” and our Torah portion begins with the commandment to appoint upright judges and enforcement officers, who will execute justice fairly, showing no favoritism and taking no bribes. Many other aspects of justice are discussed in the Torah portion, including respecting precedents and legal decisions (17:11), preventing revenge killings while bringing those who commit murder and manslaughter to justice (19:1-13), establishing rules for witnesses and consequences for perjury (17:7, 19:15-18), and appealing to higher authorities when the law is unclear (17:8-9). The final chapter of the Torah portion, 21, holds elders and magistrates responsible for the commission of crimes on their watch and for the safety of citizens and strangers.

The following are meditations, exercises, and discussion questions to help you contemplate justice this Shabbat and increase justice in yourself and in the world:

1. Spend some time with the most famous verse of this week's Torah portion: "Justice, justice you shall pursue in order that you may live; then you will inherit the land which Adonai is giving to you." Relate to and wonder about each word and phrase:
 - Why does the word justice repeat?
 - How do justice and the pursuit of justice enable life?
 - Why must justice be pursued, while the vast majority of mitzvot are merely done when the opportunity arises?
 - In saying that the pursuit of justice precedes the inheritance of the Promised Land is the Torah making a statement about divine order, the way of the world, their priority in importance, and/or something else?
2. Use *tzedek, tzedek tirdof* or "justice, justice you shall pursue" as a mantra (phrase you return to in your mind during a period of silent meditation).
3. Sing and discuss the last verses of Psalm 92, the Psalm for Shabbat.

The righteous (*tzadik* can also literally be translated as "the just") shall flourish like the palm tree, shall grow like a cedar in Lebanon. Planted in the house of Adonai, they shall flourish in the courts of our God. They shall still bring forth fruit in old age; they shall be full of sap and richness, to declare that Adonai is upright, my Rock, in whom there is no unrighteousness.

- Here the psalm compares the righteous and just to sturdy trees. In verse 8, it likens the wicked to grass, which springs up easily but is also easily destroyed. How is justice more lasting than malfeasance?
4. Many people have the custom of emptying their pockets of money just before Shabbat and putting it in a *pushke* (charity box) that is placed next to their Shabbat candlesticks. Consider setting aside loose change before Shabbat and directing it to a cause that will increase justice in the world. If you live with others, discuss as a group where your *tzedakah* money should go.
 5. Contemplate: Is there any way your Shabbat practices could be more just? How might you promote justice in preparing for or observing Shabbat?
 6. What could you do in the New Year to promote justice?