

TIMELESS∞TORAH

Summer Reflections

PARSHAT SHOFTIM - PERSONAL INVESTMENT IN COMMUNAL JUSTICE

Personal Investment in Communal Justice

The themes of this week's parshah, Shoftim, overwhelmingly focus on the *klal* (community) rather than the *yachid* (individual). The parshah sets out the rules needed to establish a judicial system, appoint a king, create cities of refuge (*arei miklat*), rules of warfare, and how to deal with challenging cases brought before the Sanhedrin. This parshah lays out foundational principles for a just, orderly society, emphasizing collective responsibility and necessary structures. This collective focus underscores a fundamental Jewish principle: individual flourishing is inextricably linked to communal health. Our personal spiritual journeys are not isolated but enriched and sustained by the communal framework within which they exist.

Yet, a striking paradox appears in the opening verses. The Torah states, '*Shoftim v'Shotrim Titen Lecha* - You (singular) shall appoint judges and officers (16:18).' Of all mitzvot, the communal obligation to establish justice systems would appear to require plural phrasing! No single individual appoints all judges; it is the essence of communal responsibility. This singular phrasing implies that their must be a subtle, deeper message embedded within the text.

Some commentators, like Rabbi Moshe Feinstein (New York, d.1986) in *Darash Moshe*, learn from this singular phrasing a reminder of the continuous need for self-judgment and personal reflection. Where are we in life? Where are we headed? Are we living up to our standards? This interpretation emphasizes that true communal order begins with individual accountability and within personal integrity. Before demanding justice from others, we must ensure that we have it within ourselves.

However, a simpler, yet equally profound reason for this singular phraseology might be that, in the Torah's eyes, the only effective way to approach communal responsibility is to place it, personally, on each member of the community. If we assume that 'someone else will do it,' problems arise. True communal flourishing demands personal investment. It must be personal. So that even the loftiest appointments, like the *shoftim* (judges), feel like they are my personal appointment. This is because I am deeply invested in the *kehilla* - it is an integral part of who I am. This personal ownership transforms passive membership into active partnership, making each individual a guardian of the community's values and future.

This attitude is also crucial because the more personally invested we are, the more we genuinely care. And the more we care, the more likely we are to do whatever is necessary for success, regardless of adverse circumstances or required *mesirut nefesh* (self-sacrifice). This personal commitment transforms abstract ideals into tangible action, making us active participants in building our collective future. This profound sense of personal responsibility has historically enabled Jewish communities to endure and thrive through countless challenges, demonstrating unparalleled resilience rooted in individual dedication.

The Pursuit of Justice: Tzedek Tzedek Tirdof

This understanding leads to the Torah's following immortal words - '*Tzedek Tzedek Tirdof* - Justice, justice you shall pursue (17:20)'. The phrase *tirdof* - 'to pursue' - is unusual. Softer words could have been used.



Contemporary Perspectives on the Weekly Parsha with Rabbi Dr Yoni Birnbaum

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Redifah (pursuit) conjures an intense, single-minded, even relentless chase, implying something dramatic, requiring a person to run after it at almost any cost. This strong verb is chosen because when the aim, the ultimate goal - in this case, the Jewish people creating a society based on *tzedek*, righteousness - is so profoundly important, it is worth pursuing with every fiber of our being, whatever challenges arise. The double mention of *tzedek* emphasizes its absolute importance, not just as a legal concept but as a moral imperative permeating every facet of society.

This focus on inherent challenges in pursuing *tzedek* - the understanding that the easiest path may often be wrong - is reflected in many statements of our Sages on this verse. Rashi brings a Midrash (Sifri): '*Halech achar beit din yafeh*, Go after a beautiful (excellent) court.' This teaches us to ensure that the Beit Din we select is truly the best. Don't settle for the easiest option. Get it right, take the time - because true justice is worth the effort and discernment. It demands diligence, integrity, and a refusal to compromise on the highest standards of fairness.

The Gemara in Sanhedrin 32b comments on the double word 'tzedek' used in this verse, with the observation: '*Echad ladin, v'echad lepushara*, 'One [word] *tzedek* refers to judgment, and one to compromise.' This reveals *tzedek* is not solely strict legal adjudication but also the wisdom to find common ground and engender harmony. The Gemara illustrates this with two examples: two ships meeting in a narrow river, where simultaneous passage sinks both, but sequential passage saves both. Similarly,

two camels ascending a steep, narrow path; simultaneous climbing causes both to fall, but sequential climbing saves both. The Ben Yehoyada (written by Rabbi Yosef Chaim of Bagdad, known as the Ben Ish Chai, d.1909) in his commentary on this Gemara explains the need for two examples here: a ship waiting is pragmatic. A camel driver holding his camel on a treacherous path is trickier, risking personal safety. Yet, it is still worth it. Though more difficult, the peace of compromise means more than rigid adherence to immediate advantage. True justice sometimes requires flexibility, empathy, and the foresight to prioritize long-term peace over short-term victory.

Obstacles to communal life are always present: external pressures, internal complexities, and human inclination towards convenience. Easier options might seem appealing, tempting us from the effort needed for collective strength. But every time we actively engage in communal life, we send a powerful sign to ourselves and our families that our community, our *kehilla*, matters deeply. In doing so, we fulfill the Torah's command - '*Shoftim v'Shotrim Titen Lecha* - Don't let someone else do it, do it yourself.' We are called upon to be leaders, to stand up and be counted, to take personal ownership of our collective destiny. This is the essence of Jewish communal responsibility: not waiting for others but recognizing our individual capacity and obligation to contribute. It is in these personal acts of commitment, that the real collective strength of the *kehilla* is forged and sustained.