

Parsha Shoftim

Deuteronomy 16:18-21:6

We have now arrived at the midpoint in the Book of Deuteronomy and at the beginning of the month of Elul, the month of introspection as we begin to prepare for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.

We are also in the middle of Moses' second discourse. The parsha Shoftim – Judges – discusses concepts and roles in government. The key to the chapter is in the fourth verse: Tzedek, tzedek teardof - justice, justice shalt thou follow that thou mayest live and inherit the land which the Lord thy God giveth thee. But tzedek also means righteousness. A tzadik is a wise man. When one gives tzedakah, it's more than charity. So those 3 basic letters, tzadee, dalet and koof, have many meanings and implications. There is also a lot written as to why the word tzedek was repeated. The Chumash relates almost two full pages to the Hebrew concept of justice – that because each person was created in the image of God, each human life has infinite value, and therefore each person must be treated with the utmost respect to guard their unalienable rights. Even persons sentenced to death must be treated with dignity!

Since the Hebrew goal of justice is peace, and God judged his people with mercy and loving kindness, a form of the word justice – tzedakah – has been reconstructed to mean charity.

According to the website bimbam.com, there are 5 kinds of justice:

1. RULES OF WORSHIP

God goes into detail as to what the Israelites can and cannot do when they worship.

2. SELECTING A KING

Later in the Bible, during the life of the prophet Samuel, God allows the children of Israel to choose a king from amongst them. But there are rules for such a man. He must not have military ambitions. He must not desire a return to Egypt. He must not have too many wives, nor attempt to become wealthy. His primary role is a judge, for on his throne he must keep a copy of the Torah with him at all times.

The roles of the Cohanim (High Priests) and Levites are again described.

The description of a Prophet, who speaks the word of God, is described. Mostly it tells us what prophets are not – a diviner, a soothsayer, an enchanter, a sorcerer, a charmer, one who consults with ghosts, or a necromancer. It also describes that the way to recognize a false prophet is the non-fulfillment of his predictions.

Thus God is creating 3 major leaders for the new nation: a King who will govern, the Priests who are responsible for worship, and the Prophets who will guide the people spiritually under the bounds of the Torah.

3. CITIES OF REFUGE

Cities of refuge are again discussed. Basically, there were 12 cities, one designated by each tribe, to which a person who kills another person can go without fear of retribution by the deceased person's relatives until that individual can be tried fairly. If the death is accidental, the offender can stay in the city, but if the death is ruled otherwise, the murderer is forced to leave.

Removing a landmark so as to increase one's property is considered a great offense. In those days, detecting a moved landmark was difficult, but it was treated as theft.

4. CREATING JUDGES

The parsha creates judges and court officers for each tribe who must be above reproach, i.e., not able to be influenced by money or position.

In any case in which the death penalty can be meted out, e.g. idolatry or premeditated murder, there must be at least two witnesses, although three is preferred. And woe to someone who bears false witness!

The concept of "an eye for an eye" is described and is intended to involve monetary rather than physical compensation for an injustice.

If the matter before the judges is deemed too difficult to decide, a Supreme Court is created to decide the matter. The Supreme Court was located where the ark resided.

5. LAWS OF WARFARE

The laws of warfare are described, from exempting those from service, such as engaged but not yet married men, or those who have yet to eat the first fruit from their vineyards, to saving captured trees, to the ultimate defeat of the nations currently occupying the land. Before a siege would begin, the nation in question (except for the Canaanites) was given the opportunity to surrender peacefully. Both the Gergashites and the Gibeonties made peace. The other tribes fought and were most annihilated.

The portion ends with a ceremony to conclude a case of murder in which the murderer could not be located. Symbolically, the elders of a city in which the murder occurred would kill a heifer and wash their hands in its blood, thereby showing that innocent blood will not stick to the hands of a murderer.

In bimbam.com, the speaker says that the parsha means a lot more. It defines the Jewish people. We have a responsibility to make sure that all forms of injustice are acted upon. Jews cannot sit idly by when others act to harm our

environment, or when we witness those suffering economic hardship, or say nothing when genocidal activity goes on in the world. God calls upon the Jewish people to respond! This may be the best meaning of Justice.

The Haftorah this week is the fourth in a row from Isaiah. They are called the Haftorahs of Consolation, and are read during the weeks that follow Tishe B'Av, the 9th day of Av, which traditional is remembered as the day both the First and Second temples were destroyed in 586 BCE and 70 AD. They are read to bring comfort and hope to the Israelites. They are also used to remind the people that their culture and value system are different from their Canaanite neighbors, and must remain so. The Torah called for the foreign nations to either surrender peacefully or be annihilated by the Children of Israel. The goal was to maintain the uniqueness of Israel.

In this Haftorah of Consolation, Isaiah tells Israel that they shall be redeemed from eventual exile (remember that Isaiah was written in 700 BCE before the exile) and that Jerusalem shall be restored to her former glory and recognized as the location of the kingdom of God. This happens in 530 BCE.

In conclusion, the Torah and Haftorah are linked together as they tell the story of the Kingdom of a Supreme God and the effort that is necessary for a civilization to remain focused on that concept. This parsha and Haftorah are excellent lead-ins to the High Holidays as we prepare to renew ourselves for the coming year. Shabbat Shalom.