

Shoftim – 5783

Within the first three verses of this week's parsha, we read one of the single most important series of words in the entire Torah. I say this knowing full well that I am only repeating what many of the sages have written for sure. But also, because this injunction plays itself out over and over again in coming to terms with who we are as a people and why it is so crucial to generation after generation to remind those we dwell among of our sacred duty. Tzedec, Tzedec, Tirdoff. Justice, Justice, shall you seek. One of the midrashim I consulted this week to find insight into this week's parsha posed the question of why the text repeats the word Tzedek – Justice twice. I found the response proposed more than a little bit meaningful. The explanation advanced was that we are enjoined to use justice to pursue justice. Justice is, in other words, not just the ends but the means to that end as well.

Immediately, I began to think about how this verse resonates not just down through the ages but right now, in our very lives as a people in the 21st century. We could flippantly refer to the role our people have played in the legal systems of so many countries in the Western World. We could point to the role we played as a people in the pursuit of equality in the societies we have found ourselves in and attribute it to this verse and how its command runs deeply in the blood of our people. But then I found myself wondering how it is that the otherwise seemingly Torah-literate Haredim and settlers in the State of Israel can be so obtuse and oblivious to the commandments of the Torah that they ignore this verse completely.

This is not the first time our people have found themselves living lives contrary to the dictates of the Torah so blatantly. Specifically, at the time of the political and religious situation that led to the collapse of the Second Temple and the polity that supported it, there was the struggle between the Sadducees and the

Pharisees. Now it is between the haredim and the secular Israelis. But before we go off and just accept that fact as a given, we need to understand and accept that the way of life of the Haredim as they live it today stems back to the era before the Second World War and the Holocaust. Many of the rabbis now in the leadership ranks of the Haredim are the children of Holocaust survivors. They have struggled all their lives to understand what it is that their parents' generation did to cause their world to be so completely destroyed. WE all of us know of "survivors" who ceased to believe in HaShem, and the religious values espoused by the Torah. They cast off the yoke of the Torah and blamed God for what had happened. I personally had friends who did not know that they were born of Jewish parents until much later in life and found it difficult to understand who and what they were as adults. Now today, there are those who have either accepted or have denied that heritage. But the Haredim have withdrawn into the world of their parents and grandparents and in Israel, recreated the world of the shtetel or the way of life of the orthodox Jews of the big cities. The vernacular is Yiddish, and their large families are a way of indicating to the world that Hitler did not triumph in the end. To them, it is just that they hide behind their culture of the old world, and they are afraid to let anyone, or anything interfere with their cocoon.

But as with any pendulum swing, it has a momentum all its own. This week's parsha warns of this very thing. It warns about false prophets and instructs the people how to handle such men or women. It also concedes that just maybe the Jewish people once in their own homeland will want a king like other polities have. However, it warns the gathered assemblage that such a king must not have too many horses, or the king to forget the Torah itself, commanding such a king to write his own Torah so he becomes familiar with commandments. It commands the people to create judges and goes on to give specific examples of how those judges are meant to pass judgement over the people. This is done so that the Jewish people will use

justice to be just. No one is above the law, and everyone is equal before the law. That has to sound familiar to all of you given what we hear and read in the papers from Washington.

When you stop to think about it, there is genius at work in the words of the Torah and the many interpretations based upon it, but just like a king is meant to study and familiarize himself with Torah, we too have to be aware of what the guardrails are so that we live within the bounds of what is acceptable behaviour towards ourselves and others too. More than a few times, certain things are forbidden which strikes us as totally unrealistic because it becomes hard to understand the reasoning. Often it is because guardrails are established so that one thing doesn't lead to another thing which then leads to us running afoul of what we are meant to do. The rabbis refer to this as a fence around the law. Things that would make us feel we are entitled to more because of who we are, for instance.

There are so many ways in which the Torah creates a web of mitzvot that, in their totality, support the entire structure. That is why we sing at the end of the Torah service, as we return the Torah to the Aron HaKodesh, that the Torah is a tree of life which we must grab a hold of and understand and follow. It is a yoke for sure, but we ought to also think of it as a web or a net, that as long as there are no holes, all will be well. But when holes develop, we slip through and become something that we are not meant to be. We could spend hours talking about the holes we know now exist causing a steady leakage of faith and practice. That's why the Haredim are so afraid of modernity. It weakens the entire structure holding orthodoxy in place. But understanding and accepting that there are weaknesses doesn't mean forcing everyone to live within the same net. It means, like fishermen who live by the sea all over the world, we have to spend hours and hours repairing our nets so that we lose precious little of our catch. Maybe it's time we returned to mending our nets instead of believing that the ends justify the means. Shoftim teaches us that the

means and the ends are exactly the same thing. They fit together like a glove.
Shabbat shalom.