Parasha Shoftim

שֹׁפְטִים וְשֹׁטְרִים תִּתֶּן-לְךָ בְּכָל-שְׁעָרֶיךָ אֲשֶׁר יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ נֹתֵן לְךָ לִשְׁבָטֶיךָ וְשָׁפְטוּ אֶת-הָעָם מִשְׁפַּט-צֶדֶק

"Justice, Justice Shall You Pursue" The Talmud tells the story of a respected judge who was crossing a narrow bridge. A man reached out to steady him so that he would not fall. Later that same day, that man appeared before the judge as a litigant. The judge immediately disqualified himself from hearing the case. The man protested, "Rabbi, I merely helped you across the bridge." The judge replied, "Exactly. If your simple act of kindness has already inclined my heart toward you, how could I possibly claim to judge with complete impartiality?" *(adapted from Ketubot 105b)* The Jewish Sages understood something our modern culture often forgets: justice is not merely about knowing the law. It is about possessing a heart that cannot be purchased, manipulated, or swayed. This truth stands at the heart of Parashat Shoftim. Moshe is nearing the end of his life. Israel stands on the eastern side of the Jordan River, ready to enter the Promised Land. Soon they will no longer live as wandering tribes gathered around the Tabernacle. They will become cities, towns, businesses, farms, courts, armies, and eventually a kingdom. The question before them is not simply, *"Can you conquer Canaan?"* Rather, it is: "Can you build a nation where God desires to dwell?" The answer depends upon three foundational principles:

- Justice without corruption.
- Worship without compromise.
- Leadership under God's authority.

These themes are just as essential for us today. Although we are followers of Messiah Yeshua, we remain called to live as citizens of God's Kingdom. Justice, holiness, and humility are not merely Old Testament ideals; they are Kingdom values that reveal the very character of God. As Rabbi Hillel famously taught in *Pirkei Avot:* "In a place where there are no men, strive to be a man." In other words, when righteousness is absent, God calls His people to stand apart. That is exactly what Shoftim teaches.

The Torah portion begins with these words: "You shall appoint judges and officers in all your gates..." The city gate was much more than an entrance. It functioned as Israel's courthouse, city council, marketplace, and public square. Every important decision affecting community life occurred there. The Hebrew word for justice, mishpat, describes more than legal procedure. It refers to God's righteous order. Whenever justice is practiced honestly, God's own character becomes visible. The rabbis observed this connection. The Talmud declares: "A judge who renders a completely truthful judgment causes the Divine Presence to dwell in Israel." *(Sanhedrin 7a)*
Notice the implication.

Justice is not merely a civic responsibility. It is an act of worship. Conversely, corruption drives away God's presence. Moshe immediately warns Israel against three dangers:

- Perverting justice.
- Showing favoritism.
- Accepting bribes.

Bribery is especially dangerous because it changes the judge before it changes the verdict. Rashi comments that even a seemingly insignificant favor can unconsciously influence a person's judgment. One does not have to receive a fortune to become compromised. Sometimes approval, friendship, popularity, or political advantage become the hidden bribes that cloud discernment. The Sages illustrated this with another well-known account. Rabbi Ishmael once refused to judge a legal dispute because one of the parties had brushed dust from his garment before entering the courtroom. Though the gesture seemed trivial, the rabbi feared that gratitude might unconsciously influence his thinking. Such sensitivity seems almost excessive to modern readers. Yet perhaps our problem is the opposite. We have become comfortable with compromises that previous generations recognized as dangerous.

Today, bribery may not arrive in an envelope filled with money. It often arrives as social pressure. It comes through fear of criticism. It comes through the desire to preserve influence. It comes through personal ambition. The Torah reminds us that justice cannot survive where personal interests outweigh God's truth. Then comes one of the greatest commands in all of Scripture: "Justice, justice shall you pursue." Why is the word repeated? The Jewish commentators offer beautiful insights. Rashi teaches we must pursue just outcomes through just methods. Sforno explains we pursue justice whether it benefits us or costs us. The rabbis also observed that one "justice" concerns our relationship with God, while the second concerns our relationship with people. Both matter. Yeshua echoed this principle centuries later. When confronting the religious leaders, He did not condemn their devotion to tithing herbs. He rebuked them because they had neglected "the weightier matters of the Torah—justice, mercy, and faithfulness." Notice He never rejected the Torah. He restored its priorities. For Messianic believers, justice begins long before entering a courtroom. It begins inside our own hearts. Before asking whether others are fair, we must ask whether we are honest in our words, gracious in our judgments, faithful in our business dealings, and truthful in our relationships. As James writes, mercy triumphs over judgment—but mercy never abandons justice. Justice and mercy embrace perfectly in Messiah.

After speaking about justice, Moshe immediately turns to worship. At first glance these subjects may seem unrelated, but in the Torah they are inseparable. A society that abandons true worship will eventually abandon true justice. Likewise, corrupt justice always reveals a heart that has first drifted from God.

The first command is surprising: "You shall not plant for yourself an Asherah of any kind of tree beside the altar of Adonai your God." To modern readers, planting a tree seems harmless. Trees symbolize life, beauty, and shade. Why would God forbid such a thing? The answer lies in the culture of ancient Canaan. The Asherah was not simply a tree; it represented the fertility goddess worshiped throughout the land. Pagan worship often mixed religious rituals with immorality, sensuality, and superstition. God knew that Israel's greatest temptation would not be abandoning Him outright—it would be attempting to worship Him while adopting the customs of the surrounding nations. This has always been Satan's strategy. Rarely does he persuade God's people to reject the Lord completely. More often he whispers, "Keep your faith—but make it look like everyone else's." The Torah calls this syncretism—mixing what is holy with what is profane. The prophet Elijah later confronted Israel with these unforgettable words: "How long will you limp between two opinions? If Adonai is God, follow Him; but if Baal, then follow him." (1 Kings 18:21) God has never accepted divided allegiance. A Hasidic teacher once told of two travelers who entered a village during a drought. One well contained pure spring water; the other had become polluted. A villager suggested mixing the waters together so that everyone might have enough to drink. The wise rabbi answered, "A little clean water cannot purify polluted water. Rather, the polluted water ruins the clean." The lesson is truth is not strengthened by compromise. Holiness is preserved by separation. This is precisely why the Torah prohibited the Asherah beside the altar. It was not merely the tree God rejected. It was the blending of truth with error. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch observed that idolatry always begins by placing something created beside the Creator. Whether it is wealth, pleasure, politics, success, or personal ambition, the human heart continually seeks to elevate created things to the place reserved for God alone. As John Calvin wrote centuries later, "The human heart is a factory of idols." The Jewish Sages understood the same truth long before. Rabbi Judah HaNasi taught: "Who is rich? He who rejoices in his portion." Contentment destroys idolatry because idols promise what only God can give.

Moshe continues: "Neither shall you set up a sacred pillar, which Adonai your God hates." This command appears puzzling because Jacob erected a standing stone at Bethel after encountering God (Genesis 28). Why would something once acceptable later become forbidden? The answer teaches an important principle. Objects themselves possess no inherent holiness or evil. Their meaning depends upon the purpose for which they are used. The Canaanites transformed standing stones into objects of pagan worship. What had once served as a memorial to God's faithfulness became associated with false religion. The rabbis therefore concluded that worship is measured not merely by outward form but by inward devotion. As the prophet Samuel declared, "Man looks on the outward appearance, but Adonai looks upon the heart."

The external matters. But the heart matters even more. Deuteronomy 17 then addresses the tragic possibility that an Israelite may openly worship other gods. Notice the remarkable safeguards God establishes before judgment can occur. The matter must be investigated carefully. There must be two or three credible witnesses. The witnesses themselves must participate in carrying out the sentence. These requirements protected Israel against false accusations, revenge, and mob justice. The Mishnah teaches: "A Sanhedrin that executed once in seventy years was called destructive." This statement does not minimize sin. Rather, it magnifies the value of human life and the seriousness of rendering judgment. Every witness knew that false testimony would place innocent blood upon his own hands. Truth demanded responsibility. This background helps us understand one of the most misunderstood encounters in the B'sorah (Gospels). When the religious leaders brought the woman caught in adultery before Yeshua, they claimed to defend the Torah. Yet they ignored its very requirements. Where was the guilty man? Where were the qualified witnesses? Where was the proper judicial process? Their concern was never justice. It was entrapment. Yeshua did not abolish the Torah. He exposed their hypocrisy. When He declared, "Let him who is without sin cast the first stone," He challenged the witnesses to examine whether they themselves had fulfilled the Torah honestly. One by one they departed. Finally, Yeshua told the woman, "Neither do I condemn you; go, and sin no more." Notice both grace and truth. He neither excused her sin nor condemned her without repentance. This perfectly reflects the character of God throughout the Torah.

For believers today, idolatry rarely involves carved statues or pagan shrines. Our idols are often more respectable. Career can become an idol. Family can become an idol. Political ideology can become an idol. Even ministry itself can become an idol if it replaces intimacy with God. Anything we cannot surrender has become a rival altar. Yeshua called His disciples to worship "in spirit and in truth." Spirit without truth becomes emotionalism. Truth without spirit becomes lifeless religion. The Father seeks both. The Holy Spirit continually removes the "Asherah poles" from our hearts—not simply sinful behaviors, but competing loyalties. As Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel wisely observed, "The beginning of faith is not wonder that God exists, but wonder that God cares." When we truly grasp God's covenant love revealed in Messiah, we no longer desire divided hearts. Our worship becomes whole. Our obedience becomes joyful. Our allegiance belongs to one King alone. That is the kind of worship Shoftim calls us to pursue. As Moshe continues his farewell address, he anticipates a day when Israel will ask for a king. The request itself is not condemned. In fact, the Torah provides instructions for the king centuries before Israel ever crowns one. This reveals the foreknowledge of God. Nothing surprises Him. Even Israel's future failures become opportunities for God to reveal His mercy and His sovereign plan.

The Torah says: "When you come into the land... and you say, 'I will set a king over me like all the nations around me,' you shall surely set over yourself the king whom Adonai your God chooses." Notice the contrast. Israel desired to be like the nations. God desired Israel to remain unlike the nations. That tension has followed God's people throughout history. Will we conform to the culture around us, or will we reflect the Kingdom of Heaven? The Apostle Rav Shaul (Paul) later echoes this very principle when he writes, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind." The struggle is timeless. A rabbi once told of a poor villager who borrowed the king's crown for a festival procession. As he wore it through the streets, the people bowed before him. By the end of the day, he forgot the crown belonged to another. When the real king arrived, the villager refused to remove it. The guards gently took the crown away, and the rabbi concluded, "Power borrowed from God becomes dangerous when we begin believing it belongs to us." This simple parable exposes one of humanity's oldest temptations. Leadership easily becomes ownership. Authority becomes pride. Service becomes self-promotion. The Torah refuses to allow this transformation. God gives Israel's future king three remarkable prohibitions. First, "He shall not multiply horses for himself." In the ancient Near East, horses represented military power. Egypt possessed magnificent chariots, and kings measured their strength by the size of their cavalry. But Israel's security was never to rest in horses. King David later wrote, "Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we will remember the name of Adonai our God." The rabbis noted that horses symbolize every human resource upon which we are tempted to depend more than God. Today our "horses" may be education, influence, technology, finances, or political strength. None of these are evil. But they become dangerous when they replace dependence upon the Lord. Rabbi Bahya ben Asher wrote, "The greater the army, the greater the temptation to forget the One who gives victory." How easily success convinces us that we no longer need God's help.

Second, "Neither shall he multiply wives for himself, lest his heart turn away." This command was tragically ignored by King Solomon. Scripture says his wives "turned away his heart after other gods." The wisest man who ever lived proved that wisdom alone cannot protect a divided heart. Love for God must remain supreme. The rabbis frequently observed that every sin begins in the heart long before it appears in one's actions. Rabbi Israel Salanter said, "The longest journey a man ever makes is from his mind to his heart." Knowledge is not enough. Truth must become transformation. Yeshua taught exactly the same principle. He explained that adultery begins with lust, murder begins with hatred, and defilement proceeds from the human heart. The Torah and the Gospel speak with one voice. God seeks wholehearted devotion.

Third, "Neither shall he greatly multiply silver and gold." Money itself is never condemned. Abraham was wealthy. Job was wealthy. Joseph of Arimathea was wealthy. The problem is never possessions. The problem is when possessions begin possessing us. Pirkei Avot teaches, "Who is rich? He who rejoices in his portion." Contentment is the antidote to greed. When wealth covers the heart, we lose sight of everyone except ourselves. Perhaps the most remarkable command in this entire section follows. Every king must personally write his own copy of the Torah. Not dictate it. Not purchase it. Not assign a scribe to prepare it. He must write it himself. Why? Because writing forces meditation. Every letter slows the mind. Every sentence shapes the heart. The Torah was never intended merely to fill a king's library. It was intended to govern his life. The Talmud teaches (*Sanhedrin 21b*) that the king actually possessed two Torah scrolls. One remained in his treasury, while the other accompanied him wherever he went—even into battle. Imagine that picture. The king never stood above God's Word. He stood beneath it. The Torah traveled with the throne. What an extraordinary model for leadership. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks beautifully observed: "Power without values becomes tyranny. The Torah exists to ensure that no king ever imagines himself greater than the law." Every king of Israel eventually failed. King Sha'ul feared people more than God. David haMelech committed grievous sin, though he repented with all his heart. King Solomon allowed prosperity to dull his devotion. The kings who followed led Israel deeper into idolatry until exile became inevitable. The Torah was waiting for a better King. That King is Yeshua the Messiah. Unlike earthly rulers, He did not accumulate horses. He entered Jerusalem riding a humble donkey, fulfilling the prophecy of Zechariah. He did not multiply wealth. He had "nowhere to lay His head." He did not seize power. He washed His disciples' feet. The King of kings demonstrated that greatness in God's Kingdom is measured not by how many serve you, but by how willingly you serve others. Jeremiah foretold a New Covenant in which God would write His Torah upon human hearts. Yeshua fulfills that promise. Through the Holy Spirit, the Torah is no longer merely written on parchment. It is engraved upon the hearts of those who belong to Him. Every believer, therefore, becomes a servant-leader under the authority of the greater King. The question Shoftim asks every one of us is profoundly simple: Who truly rules your heart? For wherever the King reigns, justice flourishes, worship remains pure, and God's presence dwells among His people.

As Parasha Shoftim concludes, the Torah presents one of its most unusual ceremonies. A murdered man is found lying in an open field. There are no witnesses, no suspects, and no evidence. Rather than simply commanding Israel to search for the murderer, God instructs the elders to measure the distance from the body to the surrounding towns, identify the nearest city, and perform the solemn ceremony of the Eglah Arufah, the breaking of the heifer's neck.

To modern readers this ritual may seem strange, but it teaches a profound truth: God holds an entire community responsible for the moral condition of its society. The Torah never asks whether the victim was wealthy, influential, or well known. Every human life possesses equal value because every person is created in the image of God. The Mishnah teaches that whoever destroys one life destroys an entire world, while whoever saves one life saves an entire world. Every person is unique, reflecting God's glory in a way no one else can. An ancient Midrash illustrates this beautifully. A shepherd returned home with ninety-nine sheep, yet instead of celebrating, he immediately went back into the hills to search for the one that was missing. When asked why he risked his life for a single sheep, he replied, "To you it is one sheep. To me it is the one entrusted to my care." Yeshua echoed this same truth when He described the shepherd who leaves the ninety-nine to seek the one lost sheep. God's Kingdom never measures people by statistics but by their immeasurable worth. Why did the elders measure the distance to the nearest city? Rabbi Moshe ben Nachman (Ramban) explained that the closest community bore responsibility because it had been entrusted with maintaining justice and safety in that region. Evil rarely appears overnight. Violence flourishes wherever justice has been neglected. The Torah asks not only, "Who committed the crime?" but also, "What kind of society allowed this to happen?" Communities are shaped by what they tolerate as much as by what they condemn. After the ceremony, the elders washed their hands over the sacrificed heifer and declared, "Our hands have not shed this blood." The Talmud explains that they were not denying murder but affirming they had not neglected the victim by allowing him to leave their city hungry, helpless, or unprotected. In Jewish thought, indifference itself can become a form of guilt. Leaders are responsible not only for what they do, but also for what they fail to notice.

Rabbi Israel Salanter illustrated this principle when he encountered an elderly man shivering in the cold. Rather than offering only a prayer, he removed his own coat and wrapped it around the man. Later he explained, "When another person's body is cold, my soul should not feel warm." That statement captures the heart of the Eglah Arufah. Biblical faith is practical. Justice means caring for the vulnerable, and holiness means noticing those whom everyone else overlooks. The innocent heifer also points toward the biblical principle of substitution. Though guiltless, it died because unresolved sin demanded atonement. This foreshadows Yeshua the Messiah. Hebrews declares that His sprinkled blood speaks a better word than the blood of Abel. Abel's blood cried out for justice, but Messiah's blood proclaims mercy while fully satisfying God's justice. At the cross, God neither ignored sin nor abandoned humanity. Instead, He provided the perfect sacrifice toward which every previous sacrifice pointed. As Isaiah prophesied, "The Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all." Shoftim reminds us that righteousness is never merely personal. Every family and congregation shapes the culture around it.

Rav Shaul tells believers to bear one another's burdens, expanding the Torah's principle of corporate responsibility through the power of the Holy Spirit. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel summarized this truth well: "Few are guilty, but all are responsible." As Israel stood at the edge of the Promised Land, the greatest challenge before them was not military but spiritual. Would they become a people marked by justice, holiness, and humility, or would they imitate the nations around them by pursuing power, wealth, and self-interest? That same choice confronts us today. The world celebrates compromise and self-promotion, but God's Kingdom calls us to pursue justice, worship with undivided hearts, lead with humility, and care for the forgotten.

The New Covenant does not replace the principles of Shoftim—it empowers us to live them. Through the indwelling Holy Spirit, God's Torah is written upon our hearts. Yeshua is the righteous Judge, the greater Prophet, the humble King, and the innocent sacrifice whose blood brings redemption. Until He returns to establish perfect justice over all the earth, the command of Shoftim still echoes: "Justice, justice shall you pursue." May our lives faithfully reflect the character of our Messiah so that others see not merely religious people, but citizens of His coming Kingdom.

b'Shem Yeshua, haMelech v'haMashiach Shelanu! Amein.
("in the name of Yeshua, our King and the Messiah! Amein.")