

Shoftim Drasha Amir

Parshat Shoftim takes place at the end of the Israelites' journey through the wilderness. Moses is speaking and relaying God's commandments to the people before his imminent death. Some of the mitzvot Moses focus around, are the idea that the Israelites should appoint just leaders and judges who won't take bribes. Moses also tells them that the Israelites are commanded to actively pursue justice, with the clear implication that if they do they will thrive in the land that they are soon to enter.

Moses commands the israelites: "*Tzedek tzedek tirdof*" - often translated as "Justice, justice shall you pursue, that you may thrive and occupy the land that your God Adonai is giving you."

When I read that line I was immediately confused. How should the Israelites, the people who were slaves in Egypt for generations, know anything about justice, let alone how to pursue it? they must have had complaints - too much hard work, not enough straw to make the bricks, not to mention the decree to kill the newborn boys! To whom would they bring their complaints? The overseers who whipped them whenever they stepped out of line? The Israelites were never treated justly - they might be able to understand the idea of justice, but also they had no access to it in Egypt.

And as for the current generation of Israelites, born in the wilderness and having spent their time following God as a pillar of smoke. what would they

know about justice? Their parents had no real experience with it - and their basic needs for food and water were taken care of by God's gifts of manna and quail, so they didn't need to fight with each other for fair access. What would they know about justice?

So through this mitzvah God establishes justice as a high value for their future society in Israel, implying that the failure to pursue justice would weaken it and cause a decline. Perhaps realizing that the Israelites need a good place to start, the Torah gives some examples of how to demonstrate or ensure justice, such as not taking bribes, as well as making sure that there are two witnesses for capital crimes, etc."

But still, what does the phrase mean? Why is the word repeated twice?

Ibn Ezra, who was born in 11th century Spain wrote in his commentary, "Moses repeats the word justice to indicate that one should pursue justice whether one gains or loses." I believe this means that you should pursue justice even if you might lose your case. For example, recently the Supreme Court made a decision to overturn *Roe v. Wade* and make reproductive rights become the individual states' decisions. After these events occurred some states like Texas and Alabama immediately banned all access to abortion. The people who are fighting these new laws are fighting in this uphill battle only because it is just to do so.

Rabbi Simcha Bunem was a rabbi in Poland in the 18th century who attempted to democratize Judaism and encourage people to learn to think for themselves. He wrote that the word *Tzedek* is repeated twice for a

specific reason: that we should “pursue justice justly.” This means that while pursuing justice you also need to be just such as following the laws, acting fairly, not giving or receiving bribes. In other words you have to pursue justice by doing the right things.

Abraham Joshua Heschel was a Polish-born American rabbi in the 20th century who marched alongside Martin Luther King Jr in support of civil rights. Heschel wrote, “Pursuing Justice means some kind of eagerness, hunger, we must actively pursue it.” This means to pursue justice you need to actively work to make the justice system reflect our ideals.

All of this is relevant today because injustice affects all of our lives. Some examples of modern injustice are the new abortion laws, racial injustice, gun violence, and many many more. All of these examples make pursuing justice so important in our society and world. After all, we should want our world to thrive, and according to Parshat Shoftim, that means making sure that our society is founded on principles of justice and equal access to it.

If you don't agree with the justice system and you think it is unfair or biased, then that will destroy your sense of trust in your community. To add on if the justice system is unfair to some people, soon you too could find yourself not being treated fairly in courts.

To wrap all of this up I believe we should all follow the example of Heschel, pursuing justice with eagerness, as well as the words of Simcha Bunem,

pursuing justice without breaking the law. Our Torah teaches that doing the right thing is critical for our community and our world to thrive.

Shabbat shalom.