

Kol Rina
An Independent Minyan
Parashat Shoftim
August 15, 2026 *** 2 Elul, 5786

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Shoftim in a Nutshell

https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/2278/jewish/Shoftim-in-a-Nutshell.htm

The name of the Parshah, "Shoftim," means "Judges" and it is found in Deuteronomy 16:18.

Moses instructs the people of Israel to appoint judges and law enforcement officers in every city. "Justice, justice shall you pursue," he commands them, and you must administer it without corruption or favoritism. Crimes must be meticulously investigated and evidence thoroughly examined—a minimum of two credible witnesses is required for conviction and punishment.

In every generation, says Moses, there will be those entrusted with the task of interpreting and applying the laws of the Torah. "According to the law that they will teach you, and the judgment they will instruct you, you shall do; you shall not turn away from the thing that they say to you, to the right nor to the left."

Shoftim also includes the prohibitions against idolatry and sorcery; laws governing the appointment and behavior of a king; and guidelines for the creation of "cities of refuge" for the inadvertent murderer. Also set forth are many of the rules of war: the exemption from battle for one who has just built a home, planted a vineyard, married, or is "afraid and soft-hearted"; the requirement to offer terms of peace before attacking a city; and the prohibition against wanton destruction of something of value, exemplified by the law that forbids to cut down a fruit tree when laying siege (in this context the Torah makes the famous statement, "For man is a tree of the field").

The Parshah concludes with the law of the eglah arufah—the special procedure to be followed when a person is killed by an unknown murderer and his body is found in a field—which underscores the responsibility of the community and its leaders not only for what they do, but also for what they might have prevented from being

done.

Haftarah in a Nutshell: Isaiah 51:12 – 52:12

https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/548000/jewish/Haftarah-in-a-Nutshell.htm

This week's haftarah is the fourth of a series of seven "Haftarot of Consolation." These seven haftarot commence on the Shabbat following Tisha b'Av and continue until Rosh Hashanah.

The haftorahs of the past two weeks open with Israel's complaint that they have been abandoned by G-d. Israel is not content with consolations offered by the prophets — instead they demand that G-d alone comfort them. In response, this week's haftarah begins with G-d's response: "I, indeed I, will comfort you."

After briefly reprimanding Israel for forgetting their Creator for fear of human and finite oppressors, the prophet describes the suffering and tribulations which Israel has endured. However, the time has arrived for the suffering to end. The time has come for Israel's oppressors to drink the "cup of suffering" which they had hitherto forced Israel to drink: "Awaken, awaken, put on your strength, O Zion; put on the garments of your beauty, Jerusalem the Holy City, for no longer shall the uncircumcised or the unclean continue to enter you. Shake yourselves from the dust, arise, sit down, O Jerusalem; free yourself of the bands of your neck, O captive daughter of Zion."

Isaiah extols the beauty of the messenger who will announce the good tidings of Redemption. "Burst out in song, sing together, O ruins of Jerusalem, for the L-rd has consoled His people; He has redeemed Jerusalem."

The haftarah ends by highlighting the difference between the Egyptian Exodus, when the Israelites hurried out of their exile and bondage, and the future Redemption: "For not with haste shall you go forth and not in a flurry of flight shall you go, for the L-rd goes before you, and your rear guard is the G-d of Israel."

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Testing Prophecy by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks z"l (5769)

<https://rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/shoftim/testing-prophecy/>

In his enumeration of the various leadership roles within the nation that would take shape after his death, Moses mentions not only the priest/judge and the king, but also the prophet:

"The Lord your God will raise up another prophet like me from among your own people. You must listen to him." Deut. 18:15

Moses would not be the last of the prophets. He would have successors. Historically this was so. From the days of Samuel to the Second Temple period each generation gave rise to men and women who spoke God's word with immense courage, unafraid to censure kings, criticise priests, or rebuke an entire

generation for its lack of faith and moral integrity.

There was, however, an obvious question: How does one tell a true prophet from a false one? Unlike kings or priests, prophets did not derive authority from formal office. Their authority lay in their personality, their ability to give voice to the word of God, their self-evident inspiration. But precisely because a prophet has privileged access to the word others cannot hear, the visions others cannot see, the real possibility existed of false prophets – like those of Baal in the days of King Ahab. Charismatic authority is inherently destabilising. What was there to prevent a fraudulent - or even a sincere but mistaken – figure, able to perform signs and wonders and move the people by the power of his words, from taking the nation in a wrong direction, misleading others and perhaps even himself?

There are several dimensions to this question. One in particular is touched upon in our Torah portion, namely the prophet's ability to foretell the future. This is how Moses puts it:

You may say to yourselves, “How can we know when a message has not been spoken by the Lord?” If what a prophet proclaims in the name of the Lord does not take place or come true, that is a message the Lord has not spoken. That prophet has spoken presumptuously. Do not be afraid of him. Deut. 18:21-22

On the face of it, the test is simple: if what the prophet predicts comes to pass, he is a true prophet; if not, not. Clearly, though, it was not that simple.

The classic case is the Book of Jonah. Jonah is commanded by God to warn the people of Nineveh that their wickedness is about to bring disaster on them. Jonah attempts to flee, but fails – the famous story of the sea, the storm, and the “great fish”. Eventually he goes to Nineveh and utters the words God has commanded him to say – “Forty more days and Nineveh will be destroyed” – the people repent and the city is spared. Jonah, however, is deeply dissatisfied:

But Jonah was greatly displeased and became angry. He prayed to the Lord, “O Lord, is this not what I said when I was still at home? That is why I was so quick to flee to Tarshish. I knew that You are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity. Now, O Lord, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live.” Jonah 4:1-3

Jonah's complaint can be understood in two ways. First, he was distressed that God had forgiven the people. They were, after all, wicked. They deserved to be punished. Why then did a mere change of heart release them from the punishment that was their due?

Second, he had been made to look a fool. He had told them that in forty days the city would be destroyed. It was not. God's mercy made nonsense of his prediction.

Jonah is wrong to be displeased: that much is clear. God says, in the rhetorical

question with which the book concludes: “Should I not be concerned about that great city?” Should I not be merciful? Should I not forgive? What then becomes of the criterion Moses lays down for distinguishing between a true and false prophet: “If what a prophet proclaims in the name of the Lord does not take place or come true, that is a message the Lord has not spoken”? Jonah had proclaimed that the city would be destroyed in forty days. It wasn’t; yet the proclamation was true. He really did speak the word of God. How can this be so?

The answer is given in the book of Jeremiah. Jeremiah had been prophesying national disaster. The people had drifted from their religious vocation, and the result would be defeat and exile. It was a difficult and demoralising message for people to hear. A false prophet arose, Hananiah son of Azzur, preaching the opposite. Babylon, Israel’s enemy, would soon be defeated. Within two years the crisis would be over. Jeremiah knew that it was not so, and that Hananiah was telling the people what they wanted to hear, not what they needed to hear. He addressed the assembled people:

He said, “Amen! May the Lord do so! May the Lord fulfil the words you have prophesied by bringing the articles of the Lord’s house and all the exiles back to this place from Babylon. Nevertheless, listen to what I have to say in your hearing, and in the hearing of all the people: From early times the prophets who preceded you and me have prophesied war, disaster, and plague against many countries and great kingdoms. But the prophet who prophesies peace will be recognised as one truly sent by the Lord only if his prediction comes true.”

Jeremiah makes a fundamental distinction between good news and bad. It is easy to prophesy disaster. If the prophecy comes true, then you have spoken the truth. If it does not, then you can say: God relented and forgave. A negative prophecy cannot be refuted – but a positive one can. If the good foreseen comes to pass, then the prophecy is true. If it does not, then you cannot say, ‘God changed His mind’ because God does not retract from a promise He has made of good, or peace, or return.

It is therefore only when the prophet offers a positive vision that he can be tested. That is why Jonah was wrong to believe he had failed when his negative prophecy – the destruction of Nineveh – failed to come true. This is how Maimonides puts it:

As to calamities predicted by a prophet, if, for example, he foretells the death of a certain individual or declares that in a particular year there will be famine or war and so forth, the non-fulfilment of his forecast does not disprove his prophetic character. We are not to say, “See, he spoke and his prediction has not come to pass.” For God is long-suffering and abounding in kindness and repents of evil. It may also be that those who were threatened repented and were therefore forgiven, as happened to the men of Nineveh. Possibly too, the execution of the sentence is

only deferred, as in the case of Hezekiah. But if the prophet, in the name of God, assures good fortune, declaring that a particular event would come to pass, and the benefit promised has not been realised, he is unquestionably a false prophet, for no blessing decreed by the Almighty, even if promised conditionally, is ever revoked ... Hence we learn that only when he predicts good fortune can the prophet be tested.

Yesodei haTorah 10:4

Fundamental conclusions follow from this. A prophet is not an oracle: a prophecy is not a prediction. Precisely because Judaism believes in freewill, the human future can never be unfailingly predicted. People are capable of change. God forgives. As we say in our prayers on the High Holy Days: “Prayer (Tefillah), penitence (Teshuvah), and charity (Tzedakah) avert the evil decree.” There is no decree that cannot be revoked. A prophet does not foretell. He warns. A prophet does not speak to predict future catastrophe but rather to avert it. *If a prediction comes true it has succeeded. If a prophecy comes true it has failed.*

The second consequence is no less far-reaching. The real test of prophecy is not bad news but good. Calamity, catastrophe, disaster prove nothing. Anyone can foretell these things without risking his reputation or authority. It is only by the realisation of a positive vision that prophecy is put to the test. So it was with Israel's prophets.

They were realists, not optimists. They warned of the dangers that lay ahead. But they were also, without exception, agents of hope. They could see beyond the catastrophe to the consolation. That is the test of a true prophet.

[Shoftim: Justice in an Era of Injustice by Rabbi Mol Paul](https://truah.org/resources/mol-paul-shoftim-moraltorah_2026_/)

https://truah.org/resources/mol-paul-shoftim-moraltorah_2026_/

Parshat Shoftim contains one of our most famous phrases — tzedek tzedek tirdof — justice, justice you will pursue. This phrase, read always during the month of Elul — a month of personal reflection and introspection — is often used as the proof text for the importance of living a life committed to pursuing justice. While I love this moral rallying cry, I wondered what happens when we read this phrase in its context. What does tzedek tzedek tirdof have to do with a parshah where Moses is laying out for the people how to build courts, appoint judges, constrain kings, evaluate prophets, conduct war, and adjudicate murder? And furthermore, what is the significance of the repetition of tzedek?

Many commentators follow Rashi's opinion that the meaning behind the repetition of the word tzedek is about the qualifications of the judges. That in order to have a just system, the judges themselves must be the ultimate example of righteousness. This interpretation doesn't sit right with me. Are not all people susceptible to bias, corruption, and abuses of power? Since God created humans to have moral agency, God must know that not only will we make unjust choices,

but that with enough power, those choices may lead to systemic oppression, authoritarianism, and violent supremacy.

In Derashot El Ami, Rabbi Moshe AviGodor Amiel zooms out and looks at the system as a whole. He makes clear that each new regime has a different definition of justice. That what justice means and how it should be carried out will change with each new leader. Therefore, the repetition can't simply be about justice on its own; rather, it is about the ethic of justice, where both the judicial process and the decision are just. This reading moves us away from justice as a personal commitment and instead suggests that justice must be embedded into the system itself so that it can be carried out. Power corrupts even exceptionally just people, especially those responsible for holding even more powerful people and systems accountable. God and Moses know this. They are not interested in building a society that is reliant on a select few righteous people; rather, they are concerned with creating an infrastructure immune to human fallibility.

Today, it is nearly impossible to imagine justice interwoven into the fabric of our U.S. judicial system. During my first week of work at T'ruah, the Supreme Court made two horrifying decisions impacting migrants: one to overturn the ability of the lower courts to block the Trump Administration's move to end Temporary Protected Status (TPS) for Haitians and Syrians, and the other to allow officials to turn asylum seekers away at the U.S.-Mexico border. Both of these decisions are catastrophically devastating, affecting 350,000 TPS holders and an uncountable number of asylum seekers.

With regard to TPS holders, plaintiffs' cases were based on two points: that the Trump administration failed to abide by required legal procedures established by Congress and that racial animus played a key role in the decision to terminate TPS status. The Supreme Court did not rule on whether the Trump Administration followed legal procedures; rather, the Court declined to allow judicial review of whether DHS followed the law. This means that in the future even an openly unlawful decision to grant or terminate TPS could be entirely insulated from judicial review. In addition, the majority opinion declared that President Trump's repeated public denigration of Haiti and Haitians did not rise to the level of unconstitutional racial animus that would permit a court to set aside the TPS decision. In short, the Supreme Court neither ensured that the government followed the law nor protected the people the law was meant to protect. And even worse, they made it so that no other court could hold the government accountable to following the law in any other TPS case.

In this case, both the means and the outcome were unjust. In fact, it is alarming how far this Supreme Court decision and the Trump Administration's gross abuse of power deviate from a governmental system described in this parshah. When judges stop asking whether those in power have followed the law, justice is no

longer embedded in the system. What guidance does Shoftim provide for us now? The verse that comes just after the repetition seemingly takes a hard left turn. We read, “You are not to plant yourself an asheirah [or] any kind of tree beside the altar of YHVH your God.” Looking up asheirah in Brown Driver Briggs, the lexicon for biblical Hebrew, we learn that it refers both to a Canaanite goddess of fortune and happiness and to a cultic symbol carved out of wood and placed near the entrance of a holy site. The rabbis of the Talmud take this a step further by saying that the asheirah was a symbol of idolatry and imagined it not as a wooden post, but rather a tree that is planted and grows roots. In Sanhedrin, Reish Lakish likens the appointment of unjust judges to planting a tree of idolatry. In keeping with Amiel’s thinking, Rabbi Thomas Alpert writes, “that is to say, a miscarriage of justice is like the planting of a tree that encourages evil and idolatrous practices.”

Now, I am not here to perpetuate the misogyny of equating the worship of a goddess to evil practices. Instead, I’ll offer a different interpretation. The move to monotheism, the worship of a single God was a move toward oneness, toward seeing everything and everyone as interconnected. Therefore, the worship of “other gods” — especially ones that we pray to to amass wealth — is a move that threatens that interconnectivity. According to the rabbis then, a miscarriage of justice threatens our ability to see ourselves as one being, as deeply reliant on each other for survival. Planting an asheirah is the biblical version of seeding wealth and greed so that its roots become so embedded into the earth that we cannot uproot them.

Parshat Shoftim is not a set of instructions for how to reform a broken system. It is a world-building exercise where, with God’s instructions, we create new systems with just processes and just outcomes. When our systems have been corrupted, perhaps our work is to build alternatives — to join together in our communities and create structures of accountability and care. If a miscarriage of justice is the same as planting an asheirah, then let us not stand by and watch the tree take root. We must uproot it and ensure that oneness and our deep interconnectedness are what we worship on our altars. And in doing so, we will build communities capable of tzedek tzedek tirdof. *(Rabbi Mol Paul (she/they) is T’ruah’s national rabbinic organizer. Mol comes to T’ruah after a 10-year career building inclusive Jewish communities as a community organizer, youth and adult educator, street chaplain, and shaliach tzibur. She was ordained from the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College in 2025.)*

Who Was “The Levite” in Deut. 18:6? by Alan Cooper

<https://www.jtsa.edu/torah/who-was-the-levite/>

From the dawn of biblical criticism, the opening verses of Deuteronomy 18 have played a crucial role in efforts to understand the history and development of the Israelite priesthood. It seems clear that the priestly activity described in these verses (and elsewhere in Deuteronomy) varies from the accounts in the Priestly

sources of the Torah in Exodus through Numbers. One obvious difference is the lack of differentiation among the Levitical clans, in contrast to the primacy given to Aaron's descendants elsewhere.

Other distinctive aspects of Deuteronomy's priests are summarized in JTS rabbinic alumnus Jeffrey Tigay's superb commentary.[1] Despite the critical issues, the gist of Deut. 18:1-8 is clear: the verses describe what Tigay calls "the endowments of the clergy," meaning how they are supported considering their lack of entitlement to a landhold.[2] The details, however, are replete with problems of interpretation. Verses 6-8 are particularly salient, and may open a window into the behavior of Deuteronomy's clergy in early Israel:

6Should a Levite from one of your towns in Israel, where he sojourns, come with all his personal desire to the place that YHWH designates, 7he may serve the Name of YHWH his god like all his fellow Levites who are stationed there in YHWH's presence. 8They shall consume like portions irrespective of his patrimony [iii]	(ו) וְכִי יָבֹא הַלֵּוִי מֵאֶחָד שְׁעָרֶיךָ מִכָּל יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲשֶׁר הוּא גָר שָׁם וְבָא בְּכָל אֹתוֹת נַפְשׁוֹ אֶל הַמָּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר יִבְחַר ה': (ז) וְשָׁרַת בְּשֵׁם ה' אֱלֹהָיו כְּכָל אֶחָיו הַלְוִיִּם הַעֹמְדִים שָׁם לִפְנֵי ה': (ח) חֶלֶק כְּחֶלֶק יֹאכְלוּ לִבְדּוֹ מִמֶּנְכֶּרִי עַל הָאֲבוֹת
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The beginning of the chapter (18:1) refers to the clergy as הכהנים הלויים, a strange term that first occurs in 17:9 and 18. A literal translation would be "the priest/Levites," pointing up the ambiguity of the pairing. In the historical books Ezra/Nehemiah and Chronicles, the two terms are separated by "and" in most cases, making it clear that "priests and Levites" are two distinct groups. Might the pairing here suggest that all Levites ("the entire tribe of Levi," 18:1), irrespective of specific lineage, may potentially serve as priests?[4] Yevamot 86b reports the contrary opinion of Yehoshua b. Levi: "In twenty-four places in the Bible the priests are called Levites," citing Ezekiel 44:5 as proof.[5] Bahya ben Asher comments that "the Levite" cannot denote an actual Levite because 18:7 says, "he may serve the Name of YHWH his god." "The priest is the one who serves, not the Levite," says Bahya, harmonizing Deuteronomy's cult functionaries with their Priestly confrères.

A different reading of verse 6, however, suggests that there are Levites who reside in Israelite towns—performing some Levitical functions there—who may wish to participate in the activities of the central cult site. They are authorized to do so as visitors on a par with their peers who are stationed there. The rabbis explain the actions here in relation to the 24 priestly courses (משמרות), which are anachronistic for Deuteronomy.

The 16th-century kabbalist Isaac Luria establishes a surprising but reasonable connection between "the Levite" sojourner here and the itinerant Levite who serves as a priest for Micah's private cult in Judges 17-18. Two textual details facilitate

the connection. First, the use of the singular with the definite article (“the Levite”) prompts traditional interpreters to seek specificity, viz., which Levite? Second, the language of sojourning (גר) is common to Judg. 17:7 and Deut. 18:6:

Deuteronomy 18:6	Judges 17:7
וְהָיָה נֶעֱר מִבֵּית לָחֶם יְהוּדָה מִמִּשְׁפַּחַת יְהוּדָה וְהוּא לֵוִי וְהוּא אֲשֶׁר הוּא גֵר שָׁם... 6	וְהָיָה נֶעֱר מִבֵּית לָחֶם יְהוּדָה מִמִּשְׁפַּחַת יְהוּדָה וְהוּא לֵוִי וְהוּא גֵר שָׁם
Should a Levite from one of your towns in Israel, where he sojourns...	There was a young man from Bethlehem in Judah from a family of Judah who was a Levite who sojourned there.

The Lurianic tradition, in his collected Liqqutei Torah (also quoted twice in Isaiah Horowitz’s compendious Shenei Luhot Haberit), asserts: “There is here [in Deut. 18:6] a marvelous allusion to an actual Levite, namely the young Levite who was Micah’s priest.”[6] And then, based on a remarkable comment in Bava Batra 109b, Luria identifies the anonymous Levite in Judges 17 with the named Levite, Jonathan ben Gershom ben Manasseh [sic], who served as priest to the Danites (Judg. 18:30).

The biblical author treats the actions of the Levites in Judges 17-18 as beyond the pale, characteristic of the chaotic time when “there was no king in Israel” (Judg. 18:1, etc.). I would propose, rather, that while the behavior of these itinerant Levites-for-hire was normal in early Israel, it was condemned and superseded by the rise of centralized monarchic and priestly authority, as exemplified by the phrase, “the place that YHWH designates” in Deut. 18:6.

The case of Jonathan ben Gershom ben Manasseh is extraordinary. In biblical manuscripts and printed editions, the nun of Manassah is raised and suspended, indicating that מנשה was a substitute for משה (Moses). According to Rashi, “for the sake of Moses’ honor the nun was written in order to change the name, and it was suspended in order to indicate that it was not Manasseh, but Moses.” So the anonymous Levite was none other than Moses’s grandson! The Gemara explains that he was called “Manasseh” because his actions were like those of the idolatrous Judean king of that name (2 Kings 21).

Now the Lurianic interpretation, following Bava Batra, connects the dots from Judges 17 and 18 back to Deuteronomy 18, offering some consolation to Moses’s compromised lineage: “It is not right to condemn [Jonathan] because he did not intend to commit idolatry. Rather, he erred in his understanding of the rabbinic saying, ‘one may commit idolatry (עבודה זרה) in order not to be dependent on charity.’” Although עבודה זרה is the idiomatic term for “idolatry,” in this case it was supposed to be taken literally as “strange work,” meaning work that was alien to

him (Bava Batra 110a).

Jonathan's misunderstanding led him to become an idolatrous priest. If he were to return to the fold, says Luria, he would be entitled to his share of the priestly portions along with his fellow Levites (Deut. 18:8). Why did Jonathan go astray? Because of his patrimony (thus interpreting ממכריו על האבות, *ibid.*), referring to a unique tradition in the Mekhilta that as a condition of his marriage to Zipporah, Moses agreed to raise his first-born Gershom (Jonathan's father) in his father-in-law Jethro's idolatrous faith. "And so the matter comes full circle (מתגלגל)," Luria concludes: "that is how the young Levite came to be an idolator."

The sojourning Levites (גר שם) direct our attention to Moses's son Gershom (גרשם). Bava Batra 109b (as glossed by Rabbi Steinsaltz) spells out the lesson:

Rabbi Elazar says: A person should always cleave to good people, meaning one should marry a woman from a good family, as this is beneficial for the offspring of that marriage. As in the case of Moses, who married a daughter of Yitro, who was a priest of idolatry, Jonathan, who was also a priest of idolatry, descended from him.

In the somber unfolding of the Talmudic/Lurianic interpretation, the anonymous Levite of Deut. 18:6 is identified with the grandson of Moses—a cautionary figure whose descent into idolatry is the consequence of his father's intermarriage. Should he forsake his idolatry, he might yet rejoin his fellow Levites in the service of YHWH. (*Alan Cooper is the Elaine Ravich Professor of Jewish Studies Emeritus at JTS*)

[1] The JPS Torah Commentary: Deuteronomy (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1996), pp. 169-172. [2] See Num. 18:20; Deut. 10:9; Josh. 13:33. [3] The meaning of the last phrase is uncertain. See Tigay, p. 172. [4] Thus, e.g., Julius Wellhausen, Prolegomena to the History of Israel (Edinburgh: A. & C. Black, 1885), pp. 124, 146-47. [5] See also Rashi on Deut. 18:1 [6] Cited from Liqqutei Torah Nevi'im Ketuvim (5733), p. 264; available on Otzar HaHochma (login required).

[Shoftim: In Both Pockets by Rabbi Yali Szulanski](https://yeshivatmaharat.org/shoftim-in-both-pockets/)
<https://yeshivatmaharat.org/shoftim-in-both-pockets/>

There is a teaching that comes up often in the recovery circles I help facilitate.

One of my co-facilitators returns to it so frequently that I have come to anticipate it. Every few weeks, someone in the circle begins speaking about themselves with a certainty that leaves no room for mercy, sometimes sounding like shame, sometimes like pride. Either way, he reaches for the same teaching.

Rabbi Simcha Bunim of Peshischa taught that every person should carry two notes, one in each pocket. In one pocket: "Bishvili nivrah ha'olam"—"For my sake the world was created" (Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5). In the other: "Va'anochi afar v'efer"—"I am but dust and ashes" (Bereishit 18:27). Knowing which pocket this moment requires matters more than deciding which note is true.

Studying Parshat Shoftim this year, I returned again to those two pockets. The parsha opens with a command to build a justice system. “You shall appoint judges and officers in all your gates...and they shall judge the people with righteous judgment” (Devarim 16:18). Just two verses later, the Torah continues: “Justice, justice shall you pursue” (Devarim 16:20).

The commentators linger over the repetition. Why say tzedek (justice) twice?

Some explain that both the ends and the means must be just. Others understand the repetition as an instruction to pursue justice under every circumstance. Something else in these verses caught my attention this year: Before the Torah commands us to pursue justice, it commands us to appoint judges (Devarim 16:18).

I spend much of my life thinking about the voices we carry inside us. As a parent and a therapist, I have watched children slowly borrow the voices of the adults who love them until those voices become their own. Long after they stop asking us what to think, they continue asking themselves in words that sound remarkably familiar.

The same is true of us. There is a judge within each of us. That judge listens to the evidence at the end of every day: the conversation we wish we had handled differently, the child we lost patience with, the email we forgot to answer, the apology we offered, the kindness no one else noticed, the effort it took simply to get out of bed.

Some judges hear only one witness. Others refuse to issue a verdict until the whole story has been told.

Perhaps that is one way to read the opening of Shoftim. Before justice, the Torah asks who is doing the judging.

The room is quiet. My co-facilitator catches the speaker’s eye from across the circle and taps the pocket of his jacket. The man nods. His hand slips into an empty pocket. He unfolds an invisible piece of paper, reads it for a long moment, folds it carefully, and puts it back. Then he begins again.

The Torah does not say to appoint judges only in the capital, or only in the courts already built for judgment. Rather, it commands us to appoint them b’khol she’arekha—“in all your gates” (Devarim 16:18).

Every threshold is a gate, a place where something is about to be let in or kept out.

I think of the gates I pass through in a single day: the hard email read before coffee, the child’s voice sharpened by exhaustion that could be met with more of the same or with something else. Some mornings even my own face in the mirror looks like a courtroom.

We tend to think of judgment as something that happens after the fact, a verdict

rendered once the evidence is in, yet the Torah's instruction suggests otherwise. Before the case, appoint the judge. Before the moment arrives, decide who will be sitting when it does.

This is the real difficulty in Rabbi Simcha Bunim's teaching. It is not hard to know that both notes are true. Of course the world was created for your sake. Of course you are dust and ash. The difficulty is that by the time you need one of them, you are usually too far into the moment to reach for it. The verdict has already been announced. The judge was already on the bench before you knew the court was in session.

So maybe the appointing has to happen earlier than the gate. Maybe it happens in the quiet stretches when nothing is being tried at all, when making the same breakfast every day, and the drive home. Perhaps, it happens in the circle where a person learns, week after week, to notice which pocket their hand is reaching for before speaking.

The man's shoulders drop half an inch. He waits one breath longer than he used to before he speaks.

"Justice, justice shall you pursue," twice, because the pursuit is never finished and never single.

The man folds the invisible paper and puts it back in his pocket. He begins again.

I do not know what is written on the notes in your pockets. I do not know which one you have reached for too often, or which one you have forgotten how to find, though I know the gates do not wait for us to be ready. They open on their own schedule, in an inbox or a hallway, in the space between what someone said and what we decide it meant.

B'khol she'arekha. In all your gates.

When the gate opens, all that is left is to reach into the right pocket and begin again. *(Rabbi Yali Szulanski's journey to Maharat was shaped by her commitment to emotional wellness, spiritual growth, and community resilience. She founded The "I Am" Project/The Neshima Initiative, bringing trauma-informed wellness practices to classrooms and Jewish spaces. R' Yali is the Youth and Family Engagement Rabbi at the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale and continues her work educating and tending to emotional wellness at SAR Academy and beyond.)*

Yahrtzeits

Cynthia Schwartz remembers her mother Elaine Schwartz on Tuesday Aug.18