

**Parshat Shoftim**  
**Pursuing a Just Government**  
**Naima Hirsch Gelman - Class of 2024**

As the child and grandchild of history teachers, I was raised to have an appreciation for government and how it operates. I grew up with a deep respect for democracy and her proponents; I was excited to turn eighteen because I could vote, and I still consider voting a crucial civil privilege that I try not to take for granted. But as the child of observant parents, I was also raised to have an appreciation for Torah and her rules. I was taught that Shabbat was not a time to prepare for those same history tests, but I could review my Gemara and Tanach notes. I knew to ask questions of my rabbis and halachic mentors when something was unclear, to have a respect for the halachic process.

Clearly that respect for the halachic process took hold, considering I now spend my time preparing to be that rabbi and halachic mentor for a new generation. And in the wake of the seismic shifts that have occurred in American politics over the past ten years, I have spent a great deal of time thinking about community and connection. During this era of bipartisan polarization, how might I relate to politics while still honoring my Judaism?

Parshat Shoftim opens with the following verses (Devarim 16:18-20):

שֹׁפְטִים וְשֹׁטְרִים תִּתֶּן-לָהֶם בְּכָל-שְׁעָרֶיךָ אֲשֶׁר יִקְוּ אֵלֶיךָ נָתַן לָהֶם לְשִׁבְטֶיךָ וְשָׁפְטוּ אֶת-הָעָם מִשְׁפַּט-צֶדֶק:

You shall appoint magistrates and officials for your tribes, in all the settlements that your God יקוק is giving you, and they shall govern the people with due justice.

לֹא-תִטֶּה מִשְׁפַּט לֹא תִכִּיר פְּנִים וְלֹא-תִקַּח שֹׁחַד כִּי הַשְׁחָד יַעֲרֹר עֵינֵי חֲכָמִים וְיִסְלַף דְּבַר צְדִיקִים:

You shall not judge unfairly: you shall show no partiality; you shall not take bribes, for bribes blind the eyes of the discerning and upset the plea of the just.

צֶדֶק צֶדֶק תִּרְדֹּף לִמְעַן תַּחֲיֶה וְיִרְשַׁת אֶת-הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר-יִקְוּ אֵלֶיךָ נָתַן לָהֶם:

Justice, justice shall you pursue, that you may thrive and occupy the land that your God is giving you.

The words *mishpat* and *tzedek* appear multiple times in these three verses. Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks writes that *mishpat* connotes a strictly legal justice system, while *tzedek* reminds us of compassion<sup>1</sup>. With this in mind, the injunction of צֶדֶק צֶדֶק תִּרְדֹּף is actually instructing us to pursue a “justice tempered by compassion,” as Rabbi Sacks writes.

When God instructs us לֹא-תִטֶּה מִשְׁפַּט, not to judge unfairly in verse 19, it appears that God is merely giving good legal advice. Don't take bribes because it isn't a way to run an effective legal system. While that may be true, the word *tzadikim* at the end of the verse suggests otherwise. If we were to operate a corrupt and unfair legal system, we would not only be unable to serve legal justice, but we would be preventing the compassionate justice that

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/devarim/tzedek-justice-and-compassion>

*tzadikim* represent. These verses teach us that we cannot have one without the other - in fact, the nation must be judged with *מִשְׁפַּט-צְדִיק*, *mishpat-tzedek*.

This is a lofty goal; but it is worth the work it entails. By operating our communities with *mishpat* and *tzedek*, we bring God into those communities and into our lives. I do not think it coincidental that we read about *tzedek* as Elul and the *Yamim Noraim* approach. Soon we will chant the words of *selichot*, the prayers with which we beseech God for a favorable outcome:

ה' ה'. אֵל-רַחוּם וְחַנוּן. אַרְךָ אַפַּיִם וְרַב חֶסֶד וְאֱמֶת

Adonai, Adonai, Almighty, Merciful, Gracious, Slow to Anger, Abundant in Kindness and Truth

In perhaps our most spiritually vulnerable season, we pray for God to invoke the quality of *rachamim*, mercy, instead of *din*, judgment.

It is imperative that our earthly judgments are tempered with mercy as well. A society whose courts or legal systems operate from a place of extremes forgets that those systems are in place to protect the vulnerable as justice is meted out. In our zeal for what is right, we must remember that we are servants of God. We must remember that it is our responsibility to act for both *tzedek* and *mishpat* wherever we may reside; whether that means voting, donating, protesting, or otherwise holding leaders and institutions accountable. We must remember the opening directive of Parshat Shoftim: to govern the people with a compassionate justice.



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