

Parsha: Shoftim

The Torah reading called “Judges” (Shoftim) opens with the command to appoint “judges and law-enforcement officials for yourself in all your city gates that the L-rd your G-d is giving you, for your tribes, and they shall judge the people with righteous judgment.

You shall not pervert justice; you shall not show favoritism, and you shall not take a bribe, for bribery blinds the eyes of the wise and perverts just words.

Justice, justice shall you pursue, that you may live and possess the land the L-rd your G-d is giving you.

This is followed by prohibitions again idolatrous trees and monuments, and offering a blemished animal to G-d. Idolatry is to be punished by death, but as with all crimes, a conviction is to be brought only upon the testimony of two witnesses.

The courts and judges are also invested with the authority to interpret and decide all matters of Torah law:

If a matter eludes you in judgment, between blood and blood, between judgment and judgment, or between affliction and affliction, words of dispute in your cities, then you shall rise and go up to the place the L-rd your G-d chooses.

You shall come . . . to the judge who will be in those days, and you shall inquire, and they will tell you the words of judgment.

You shall do according to the word they tell you, from the place the L-rd will choose, and you shall observe to do according to all they instruct you.

According to the law they instruct you and according to the judgment they say to you, you shall do; you shall not diverge from the word they tell you, either right or left.

Appointing a King

When you come to the land the L-rd, your G-d, is giving you, and you possess it and live therein, and you say, “I will set a king over myself, like all the nations around me”:

You shall set a king over you, one whom the L-rd your G-d chooses; from among your brothers you shall set a king over yourself . . .

Only, he may not acquire many horses for himself, so that he will not bring the people back to Egypt in order to acquire many horses, for G-d said to you: “You shall not return that way any more.”

He shall not take many wives for himself, lest his heart turn away; and he shall not acquire much silver and gold for himself.

The king should have two copies of the Torah scroll made for him, one of which should accompany him constantly, “and he shall read it all the days of his life, so that he may learn to fear the L-rd his G-d, to keep all the words of this Torah and these statutes, to perform them. So that his heart will not be haughty over his brothers, and so that he will not turn away from the commandment, either to the right or to the left, in order that he may prolong his days in his kingdom, he and his sons, among Israel.”

More Mitzvot

Moses reiterates some of the Israelites’ duties toward the *kohanim* and the Levites, including the gifts set aside from the farmer’s produce, shearings and slaughtered cattle. Next are the prohibitions against the various forms of sorcery and superstitions, the duty to obey the prophet, and the setting aside of “Cities of Refuge” for someone who kills unintentionally.

The stealing of land by surreptitiously moving back the boundary marker is strictly forbidden. False witnesses, if refuted through the process of *zomemim* (i.e., other witnesses testify that they were in another place and could not have witnessed the crime they claim to have witnessed), are subjected to the punishment they would have had inflicted on the accused.

Laws of War

A *kohen* (called the *mashuach milchamah*, “anointed for battle”) is appointed to the task of preparing the people for war. “Hear, O Israel,” he announces to the people, “today you are approaching the battle against your enemies. Let your hearts not be faint; you shall not be afraid, you shall not be alarmed, and you shall not be terrified because of them. For the L-rd your G-d is the One who goes with you, to fight for you against your enemies, to save you.”

The following are exempted from participating in the battle:

“Is there a man who has built a new house and has not yet inaugurated it? Let him go and return to his house, lest he die in the war, and another man inaugurate it.

“Is there a man who has planted a vineyard, and has not yet redeemed it? Let him go and return to his house, lest he die in the war, and another man redeem it.

“Is there a man who has betrothed a woman and has not yet taken her in marriage? Let him go and return to his house, lest he die in the war, and another man take her in marriage.”

And finally:

“Is there a man who is fearful and fainthearted? Let him go and return to his house, that he should not cause the heart of his brothers to melt like his heart.”

Terms of peace must first be offered to a city before attacking it. No fruit trees are to be destroyed to build siege towers—only non-fruit-producing trees may be cut down (this is the source of the prohibition of *lo tashchit*, not to wantonly destroy any useful thing). It is in this context that the Torah makes the famous analogy comparing man to “a tree of the field.”

Eglah Arufah (The Law of the Anonymous Murder Victim)

If a slain person be found in the land which the L-rd your G-d is giving you to possess, lying in the field, and it is not known who slew him:

Your elders and judges shall go forth, and they shall measure to the cities around the corpse. And it will be [that from] the city closest to the corpse, the elders of that city shall take a calf with which work has never been done, [and] that has never drawn a yoke.

The elders of that city shall bring the calf down to a rugged valley, which was neither tilled nor sown, and there in the valley they shall decapitate the calf . . .

And all the elders of that city, who are the nearest to the corpse, shall wash their hands over the calf that was decapitated in the valley.

They shall announce and say: "Our hands did not shed this blood, nor did our eyes see. Atone for Your people Israel, whom You have redeemed, O L-rd, and lay not [the guilt of] innocent blood among Your people Israel." And so the blood shall be atoned for them.

You shall abolish the [shedding of] innocent blood from among you, for you shall do what is proper in the eyes of G-d.

Shabbat Shalom!