

Today's Portions

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Shoftim in a Nutshell

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

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

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 haftarahs 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 haftorah 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

The Ecological Imperative (Shoftim 5779) by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

<http://rabbisacks.org/the-ecological-imperative-shoftim-5779/>

In the course of setting out the laws of war, the Torah adds a seemingly minor detail that became the basis of a much wider field of human responsibility, and is of major consequence today. The passage concerns a military campaign that involves laying siege to a city:

When you lay siege to a city for a long time, fighting against it to capture it, do not destroy its trees by putting an axe to them, because you can eat their fruit. Do not cut them down. Are the trees people, that you should besiege them? However, you may cut down trees that you know are not fruit trees and use them to build siege works until the city at war with you falls. (Deut. 20:19–20)

War is, the Torah implies, inevitably destructive. That is why Judaism's highest value is peace. Nonetheless, there is a difference between necessary and needless destruction. Trees are a source of wood for siege works. But some trees, those that bear fruit, are also a source of food. Therefore, do not destroy them. Do not needlessly deprive yourself and others of a productive resource. Do not engage in a "scorched earth" tactic in the course of war.

The Sages, though, saw in this command something more than a detail in the laws of war. They saw it as a binyan av, a specific example of a more general principle. They called this the rule of bal tashchit, the prohibition against needless destruction of any kind. This is how Maimonides summarises it: "Not only does this apply to trees, but also whoever breaks vessels or tears garments, destroys a building, blocks a wellspring of water, or destructively wastes food, transgresses the command of bal tashchit." [1] This is the halachic basis of an ethic of ecological responsibility.

What determines whether a biblical command is to be taken restrictively or expansively? Why did the Sages take this seemingly minor law to build out a wide halachic field? What led the Sages in the direction they took?

The simplest answer lies in the word "Torah". It means law. But it also means: teaching, instruction, direction, guidance. The Torah is a lawbook like no other, because it includes not only laws but also narratives, genealogies, history, and song. Law as the Torah conceives it is embedded in a larger universe of meanings. Those meanings help us understand the context and purpose of any given law.

So it is here. First and foremost is the fact that the earth is not ours. It belongs to its Creator, to God Himself. That is the point of the first chapter of the Torah: "In the beginning, God created..." He made it; therefore He is entitled to lay down the conditions within which we live in it as His guests.

The logic of this is immediately played out in the story of the very first humans. In Genesis 1 God commands humanity: "Fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground" (Gen. 1:28). "Subdue" and "rule" are verbs of dominance. In Genesis 2, however, the text uses two quite different verbs. God placed the first man in the Garden "to serve it [le'ovdah] and guard it [leshomrah]" (Gen. 2:15). These belong to the language of responsibility. The first term, le'ovdah, tells us that humanity is not just the master but also the servant of nature. The second, leshomrah, is the term used in later biblical legislation to specify the responsibilities of one who undertakes to guard something that is not their own.

How are we to understand this tension between the two opening chapters? Quite simply: Genesis 1 tells us about creation and nature, the reality mapped by the natural

sciences. It speaks about humanity as the biological species, *Homo sapiens*. What is distinctive about humans as a species is precisely our godlike powers of dominating nature and exercising control of the forces that shape the physical world. This is a matter of fact, not value, and it has increased exponentially throughout the relatively short period of human civilisation. As John F. Kennedy put it in his inaugural presidential address: "Man holds in his mortal hands the power to abolish all forms of human poverty and all forms of human life." [2] Power is morally neutral. It can be used to heal or wound, build or destroy.

Genesis 2, by contrast, is about morality and responsibility. It tells us about the moral limits of power. Not everything we can do may we do. We have the power but not the permission; we have the ability but not the right. The earth is not ours. It belongs to God who made it. Therefore we are not the owners of nature but its custodians. We are here to serve it and care for it.

This explains the story that immediately follows, about Adam, Eve, the serpent, and the forbidden fruit. What the fruit was, why the serpent spoke, and what was the nature of the first sin – all these are secondary. The primary point the Torah is making is that, even in paradise, there are limits. There is forbidden fruit. Not everything we can do may we do.

Few moral principles have been forgotten more often and more disastrously. The record of human intervention in the natural order is marked by devastation on a massive scale. [3] Within a thousand years, the first human inhabitants of America had travelled from the Arctic north to the southernmost tip of Patagonia, making their way through two continents and, on the way, destroying most of the large mammal species then extant, among them mammoths, mastodons, tapirs, camels, horses, lions, cheetahs, and bears.

When the first British colonists arrived in New Zealand in the early nineteenth century, bats were the only native land mammals they found. They discovered, however, traces of a large, ostrich-like bird the Maoris called "moa." Eventually skeletons of a dozen species of this animal came to light, ranging from three to ten feet high. The remains of some twenty-eight other species have been found, among them flightless ducks, coots, and geese together with pelicans, swans, ravens, and eagles. Animals that have not had to face human predators before are easy game, and the Maoris must have found them a relatively effortless source of food.

A similar pattern can be traced almost everywhere human beings have set foot. They have consistently been more mindful of the ability to "subdue" and "rule" than of the responsibility to "serve" and "guard." An ancient Midrash sums this up, in a way that deeply resonates with contemporary ecological awareness: When God made Adam, He showed him the panoply of creation and said to him: "See all My works, how beautiful they are. All I have made, I have made for you. Take care, therefore, that you do not destroy My world, for if you do, there will be no one left to mend what you have destroyed." [4]

Environmental responsibility seems to be one of the principles underlying the three great commands of periodic rest: Shabbat, the Sabbatical year, and the Jubilee year. On Shabbat all agricultural work is forbidden, "so that your ox and your donkey may rest" (Ex. 23:12). It sets a limit to our intervention in nature and the pursuit of economic growth. We remind ourselves that we are creations, not just creators. For six days the earth is handed over to us and our labours, but on the seventh we may perform no "work," namely, any act that alters the state of something for human purposes. Shabbat is thus a weekly reminder of the integrity of nature and the limits of human striving.

What Shabbat does for humans and animals, the Sabbatical and Jubilee years do for the land. The earth too is entitled to its periodic rest. The Torah warns that if the Israelites do not respect this, they will suffer exile: "Then shall the land make up for its

Sabbatical years throughout the time that it is desolate and you are in the land of your enemies; then shall the land rest and make up for its Sabbath years" (Lev. 26:34). Behind this are two concerns. One is environmental. As Maimonides points out, land which is overexploited eventually erodes and loses its fertility. The Israelites were therefore commanded to conserve the soil by giving it periodic fallow years, not pursuing short-term gain at the cost of long-term desolation.[5] The second, no less significant, is theological: "The land," says God, "is Mine; you are but strangers and temporary residents with Me" (Lev. 25:23). We are guests on earth.

Another set of commands is directed against over-interference with nature. The Torah forbids crossbreeding livestock, planting a field with mixed seeds, and wearing a garment of mixed wool and linen. These rules are called *chukim* or "statutes." Samson Raphael Hirsch (Germany, 1808–1888) in the nineteenth century, like Nachmanides six centuries earlier, understood *chukim* to be laws that respect the integrity of nature. They represent the principle that "the same regard which you show to man you must also demonstrate to every lower creature, to the earth which bears and sustains all, and to the world of plants and animals." They are a kind of social justice applied to the natural world: "They ask you to regard all living things as God's property. Destroy none; abuse none; waste nothing; employ all things wisely.... Look upon all creatures as servants in the household of creation." [6]

So it was no accident that Jewish law interpreted the prohibition against cutting down fruit-bearing trees in the course of war as an instance of a more general prohibition against needless destruction, and more generally still, against acts that deplete earth's non-renewable resources, or damage the ecosystem, or lead to the extinction of species.

Václav Havel made a fundamental point in *The Art of the Impossible*: "I believe that we have little chance of averting an environmental catastrophe unless we recognise that we are not the masters of Being, but only a part of Being." [7] That is why a religious vision is so important, reminding us that we are not owners of our resources. They belong not to us but to the Eternal and eternity. Hence we may not needlessly destroy. If that applies even in war, how much more so in times of peace. "The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it" (Ps. 24:1). We are its guardians, on behalf of its Creator, for the sake of future generations. [1] Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, *Hilchot Melachim* 6:10.

[2] Washington, DC, January 20, 1961. [3] Jared Diamond's *Guns, Germs, and Steel* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1997) and *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed* (New York: Viking Penguin, 2005) are classic texts on the subject. [4] *Ecclesiastes Rabbah* 7:13. [5] Maimonides, *Guide for the Perplexed*, III:39. [6] Samson Raphael Hirsch, *The Nineteen Letters*, letter 11. [7] Václav Havel, *The Art of the Impossible* (New York: Knopf, 1997), 79.

[Prophets of Faith: Shofetim by Amy Kalmanofsky](http://www.jtsa.edu/prophets-of-faith)

<http://www.jtsa.edu/prophets-of-faith>

I often distinguish between faith and belief and consider myself to be a person of faith. Whereas belief implies a degree of certainty that I am uncomfortable with, faith embraces doubt. To my ear, the statement that I believe something to be true communicates that you know something is true. The statement that I have faith that something is true suggests that you desire or suspect something is true. Belief seems restrictive to me—confined by only what is known or can be known—and is at risk of dogmatism.

As a person of faith, I develop a religious language and perspective that extends beyond certainties. One that is not circumscribed by only that which I can know, see, and prove. And, most importantly, a language that encompasses aspirational qualities of the religious imagination and the human heart and soul.

I think of the distinction between faith and belief in the context of Parashat Shofetim which is concerned with the various types of leaders that governed Israelite society: judges, kings, priests, and prophets. Throughout the parashah, the Torah seems

concerned with placing limitations upon Israelite leaders to prevent the abuse of power. Judges must not accept bribes in the pursuit of justice. Kings must not accumulate too many horses or wives. Priests have no territorial claims and are supported only through prescribed cultic offerings. Prophets must speak in God's name and may not practice any forms of divination by casting spells or consulting with spirits.

Prophets stand out among the leaders mentioned in Shofetim. Priests and kings are dynastic leaders born into their positions. Judges are appointed by the people, presumably because they demonstrated wisdom and integrity. Prophets, however, are called into service by God, and therefore must assert their authority over, and prove their legitimacy before, the people. Given this, the question posed by the people in Deut. 18:21 is genuine and vital: How will we know [אֵיכָה נֵדַע] that the word spoken is the word of God?

The question "How will we know?" sounds to my ear like a fundamental question of belief not faith. The people want to know with certainty that the prophet speaks for God. In other words, they want to believe in the prophet and not have faith that the prophet speaks for God.

In response, the Torah offers two means to test the veracity of a prophet. First, the true prophet speaks in God's name and not in the name of other gods. Second, the prophecy must come true. The first criterion easily is satisfied. Even a false prophet should have enough smarts not to speak in the name of another god, though Jer. 2:8 condemns prophets who apparently spoke in Baal's name. The second criterion is more difficult to fake. The prophet must prove right. There can be no doubt.

I do not blame the people for wanting to believe in (and not solely have faith in) their prophets and for asking the question "How will we know?" I understand their anxiety and desire for certainty. I, too, desire certainty in a world that appears to grow more and more unstable and want to appoint leaders that I know will guide me through it. Yet, unlike my ancient forebearers, I do not expect nor want to believe in my leaders. I want to have faith in them, particularly in my religious leaders. And I want my religious leaders to express themselves with the language of faith, not belief.

I look for religious leaders who strive to hear God, but who don't know they speak for God. I seek religious leaders who are sensitive to the mysteries of our existence and who are poets that can express those mysteries. I seek religious leaders who have faith that we are more than the sum of our parts and who offer some vision for what that means. Faith may lack certainty, but it incorporates hope. Expressions of faith offer a hopeful vision of what can be and not what is. I look for religious leaders who can express that vision and that can inspire me to claim my place within that vision.

In my view, Israel's prophets were people of faith and not belief. Their words were more effective than true. They were Israel's poets who were able to see and express the mysteries of the universe. They also expressed hope with images of a restored Israel. Even their visions of doom were, at some level, hopeful as they were meant to inspire repentance and a renewed commitment to God.

Israel's prophets could see beyond what was happening to what was possible. They could see beyond Israel's sins to Israel's potential for good. They were people of faith. There may be no better example of prophetic faith than Isaiah's words from this week's haftarah. Isaiah addresses a decimated Israel who has suffered God's rebuke—an Israel who swoons in the streets and reels from having drunk from the cup of God's wrath (Isa. 51:20–22).

To this Israel, Isaiah beckons them to arise from the dust and adorn robes of majesty (52:1–2).

To this Israel, the faithful prophet proclaims: "Your watchmen raise their voices. Together, they shout for joy. For every eye will see God's return to Zion. Raise a shout together, Ruins of Jerusalem! For God will comfort the people. God will redeem

Jerusalem" (vv. 8–9).

How do we know that the prophet Isaiah speaks the truth? We don't. But I have faith that he does. *(Amy Kalmanofsky is the Dean of the Albert A. List College of Jewish Studies and Blanche and Romie Shapiro Associate Prof., Bible)*

Shoftim by Cantor Sandy Horowitz

<https://ajrsem.org/teachings/divreitorah/>

"Return to Me". As I was folding my food-delivery bag I saw those printed words on the bottom. The actual words were "Return Me" (a message for the sake of sustainability) but that's not what I saw; the mind is a funny thing sometimes. We are in the month of Elul, countdown to the High Holidays. Return to Me! Return to the One in Whose Guidance we trust; return to me, my most sacred authentic self. There are many ways to approach this period of preparation and personal reflection prior to the Days of Awe; a theme from Parashat Shoftim suggests one framework: that theme is justice.

This week's Torah reading begins with God's establishment of a legal structure, for the time when the Israelites will dwell in their new home across the Jordan. Judges and law enforcement officials are to be established in all the tribes, and these officials shall judge the people righteously ("v'shaftu et ha'am mishpat tzedek")(Deuteronomy 16:18). In the following chapter we read that if a dispute cannot be resolved the kohanim, the priests, are to be consulted and their judge shall have final say. Once a king has been selected, that king too must abide by the same laws, as he is instructed in Deut. 17:18-19:

"And it will be, when he sits upon his royal throne, that he shall write for himself two copies of this Torah on a scroll.... And it shall be with him, and he shall read it all the days of his life... to keep all the words of this Torah and these statutes, to perform them". A rule of law has been established and no one is exempt, not even the king. This judicial structure also holds every individual responsible for acting justly. Immediately following the verse that establishes judges and law officers we read, "You shall not pervert judgement (lo tateh mishpat)" ... and the famous phrase, tzedek, tzedek tirdof, "justice, justice shall you pursue" (Deut. 16:19-20). Here the text is speaking directly in the second person, to us.

This then, is our suggested guidepost from Shoftim whereby we may examine our lives and our deeds. Tzedek, tzedek tirdof. The word tzedek is repeated, and that emphasis is further strengthened by the use of the verb tirdof – pursue. With its emphatic repetition and the accompanying verb, this commandment suggests that this is not a passive or occasional endeavor, we must engage the pursuit of justice actively and consciously.

Should we require further motivation regarding the active pursuit of justice, we may find it in Proverbs 13:21 where the verb of pursuit shows up again, with the phrase "hata'im t'radef ra'ah (Evil pursues sinners)".* Just imagine evil personified, chasing after those who are ethically weak and therefore vulnerable, and luring them to perform further sinful acts. Rather than allow evil to pursue us when we are feeling weak and vulnerable – and for many of us in these times, exhausted – we are commanded in Shoftim to turn around and become the pursuers, pursuers of justice, not evil.

When we see that acts of hatred, racism and violence are on the rise, Parashat Shoftim offers us a banner with the words Tzedek tzedek tirdof, beneath which we, the people, are called to respond. Some of us might respond by means of social activism; equally urgently, we can each seek ways to become more righteous and justice-loving in our everyday actions and interactions with those whom we encounter.

May we be inspired by one other citation of "tzedek" from Psalm 97, which we will hear on the evening of Yom Kippur:

Or zarua latzadik, ul'yishrei lev simha.

"Light is sown for the righteous, and for those with an upright heart, gladness".

*the complete text of Proverbs 13:21 is "hata'im t'radef ra'ah v'et tzadikim y'shalem tov", Evil pursues sinners and the righteous are filled with good (reward)". Whether, or how, the righteous are in fact rewarded is a separate question; tzedek tzedek tirdof commands us to pursue justice without consideration of its potential benefit to ourselves. (Cantor Sandy Horowitz (AJR '14) is an independent cantor and tutor.)

Do Not Let Your Heart Falter by Rabbi Adam Greenwald

<https://t.e2ma.net/message/k5t2xb/gu2i2kb>

This week's Torah reading records that before going out to battle, the Israelite troops would gather together to hear from their leaders. The generals would give the orders, and then a priest would step forward and bless the assembled soldiers. He would say to them:

"Hear, O Israel! You are about to join battle with your enemy. Let not your heart falter. Do not be in fear, or in panic, or in dread of them. For it is the Adonai your God who marches with you to do battle for you against your enemy, to bring you victory" (Deuteronomy 20:3-4).

For all of recorded human history, one of the functions of religious leaders has been to give sacred sanction to warfare. Clergy of all varieties have inspired young men to fight, and often to die, on behalf of their nation or their God. Sermons like the one presented in Deuteronomy were meant to stiffen spines and harden hearts, to inspire bravery in battle and reassure the troops that victory is inevitable because they fight "with God on their side."

One of my favorite Torah commentators is Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Yehuda Berlin (1816-1893), known as the Netziv, whose beautifully written commentary Haemek ha-Dvar ("The Depths of the Word") is notable for its often stunningly subversive re-readings of the text. Writing on this passage, the Netziv adds his audacious spin on the line, "Do not let your heart falter" (Deuteronomy 20:3). He says: "Do not let your heart falter... to cause you to do wrong to your enemies, after they fall into your hands."

In an instant, the priest's role is transformed from exhorting the troops to be fearless in battle, to warning them of the moral pitfalls of unchecked aggression. Warfare, even in the most justified of circumstances, is always an ethically fraught undertaking.

Religion's proper role in it, the Netziv says, is to teach responsibility and restraint rather than inspire ferocity. We all have battles to be fought, some literal and some metaphorical, and in all cases, it is incumbent upon us not to lose our humanity in the process, lest we become exactly what we are fighting against.

Elul, the month of preparation for the High Holy Days, during which this parsha is read, is a period of deep self-reflection. In it, we are invited to examine our actions, our motivations, and our shortcomings. We are cautioned to check in with ourselves to ensure that we are listening to the better angels of our nature.

The Netziv's re-reading of this parsha is a powerful example of the inner work that we are called to do during this time. He teaches us that even when it appears that right thing to do is to harden our heart, we are to remember that that is the way of Pharaoh, not the way of holiness. Our job is to keep our hearts open and pliable, to fight our battles but not lose our compassion, to do what the moment demands without succumbing to the temptation to abandon our values. That's how we enter into this time of transformation. That's what it means to keep our heart from faltering. (Rabbi Adam Greenwald, is the Executive Director of the Louis & Judith Miller Introduction to Judaism Program at American Jewish University.)

Justice & Politics by Dr. Shaiya Rothberg, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty

<http://campaign.r20.constantcontact.com/render?m=1102506082947&ca=d6c0da4e-d480-4af6-a0af-d20ee9e02dae>

A hallmark of historical Judaism is the centrality of justice for religion. Isaiah went so far as to say, in the name of God, that God cannot endure the doing of injustice alongside the performance of religious ceremonies (Isaiah 1:13). When we nonetheless

concoct that cocktail, teaches the prophet, the inevitable result is destruction and exile. It's hard to imagine a more absolute statement of the preeminent importance of justice for the Jewish conception of religion.

Strikingly, in just one verse in our portion, Devarim 16:19, the Torah captures what is perhaps the very essence of justice. Justice means no discrimination (the first half of the verse) and no ulterior motives (the second half). The verse's explanation of the prohibition of bribery reveals another crucial element: Bribery is forbidden because it blinds the eyes of the judge to the truth. That is to say, justice requires an honest attempt to discover the truth about the facts.

Rabbinic tradition understands our verse as a code of behavior for judges. Another interpretation was offered by Rabbi Chaim Hirschensohn in his monumental halachic work Malki Bakodesh (1:11). First, he argues that "judges and officers" in the context of the Bible involve all the branches of government (not just what we would today call the judicial branch but also the legislative and executive branches). Furthermore, he argues that since Devarim 16:18 commands that we appoint judges and officers, clearly the addressee of the verse is not the judges and officers themselves, but the people who appoint them. In a democracy, concludes the Rabbi Hirschensohn, you and I are those people and therefore these verses apply to us when we participate in democratic elections.

When I survey the global political scene with this d'oraita (Biblical) halachic obligation in mind, I'm struck how relevant Devarim 16:19 has remained in our day. In fact, it seems like a whole crop of politicians, across many countries and from both the "left" and "right" seem to compete over who can most absolutely repudiate the essence of justice as conceived in our verse. They openly delegitimize any attempt to objectively investigate the facts of any matter in which they have an interest. They flaunt their ability to abuse public authority for personal gain as a sign that they are powerful enough to be worthy of leadership. And they openly stoke the hatreds and fears of their audiences, against Jews or Arabs or whomever, to gather support for themselves and their discriminatory agenda.

Rabbi Hirschensohn seeks to impress upon us that how we vote is of ultimate Jewish religious significance. His teaching reflects not only the ancient prophets but also a more contemporary theme. Figures as diverse as Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, Rav Kook, Martin Buber and Rabbi Heschel, argued that modernity has seen the rise of a politics walled off from the obligations of justice (exemplified, I believe, by the politicians described above). And they taught that our mission as the People Israel is to tear that wall down.

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch expresses this theme in his explanation of the Abrahamic blessing to humanity (Bereshit 2:12): "The honesty, humanity and love which one still demands from individuals is regarded as folly in the relation of nation to nation, have no meaning in diplomacy and politics. Deception and murder which in individuals lead to prison and gallows, if exercised on a grand scale in the 'interests of the state' are crowned with laurel and medals. The Abrahamic nation is to know nothing of these national institutions, is to have no national politics and no political economy."

Rabbi Hirsch, as is his way, takes his vision to the extreme. I'm not sure that I can imagine a real society with no politics whatsoever. But I can imagine leaders who seek to embody the principles of justice laid down Devarim 16:19 rather than to brazenly flout them. And it seems clear, based on the Torah itself and the teachings of both ancient prophets and recent sages, that core to our religious mission is the struggle to guarantee that our "judges and officers" are worthy of leadership not only in their own eyes but in the eyes of God.

Yahrtzeits

Merna Most remembers her husband Dr. David Most on Thursday September 12th (Elul 12)

