
“Justice, justice you shall pursue”

In chapter 16 of Deuteronomy we hear the summons, “You shall appoint judges and officials throughout your tribes... and they shall render just decisions for the people” (16:18). The judicial figures appointed here are not priests but lay people, apparently selected from existing chiefs, officials and military personnel.

Justice, justice you shall pursue... (Deut.16:20, Friedman).

Justice, and only justice, you shall pursue... (Deut.16:20, NRSV).

This verse, with its repetition of the Hebrew word for justice, *tzedek*, has attracted the Jewish sages’ attention and interpretation over centuries of Torah study. In the oral transmission of texts repetition was a common way to indicate emphasis. It also opened the door for further interpretation. What interpretations emerge from the sages?

For the medieval scholar Rashi, the repetition of the Hebrew word for ‘justice’ suggests that one should ‘seek reliable civil courts.’ Other commentators take it to mean that justice should be pursued only through just means. Still others say that justice should be sought for both plaintiff and defendant. *Targum Onkelos* (an Aramaic translation of the Hebrew Bible) interprets the repeated word as a call for honesty and integrity. “It is better to choke, than to utter a lie,” goes one rabbinic saying, indicating how highly esteemed is truthfulness in rabbinic thought. The first characteristic of a good judge, then, is honesty, and the most basic way to pursue justice is to pursue truth.

And you? How might you creatively interpret the double use of *tzedek*, ‘justice’?

Justice and righteousness are central religious and ethical categories in Judaism. One cannot claim to love God without being concerned for justice. In the midrash (*Deut. Rabbah*) we find the comment that God prefers justice to ritual sacrifice. It notes that Scripture does not say that God loves justice as much as sacrifice, but rather more than sacrifice (Proverbs 21:3). It then elaborates on this with further reasons

for the superiority of justice over sacrifice. Briefly:

1. Sacrifice was only useful while the Temple stood, but after its destruction sacrifice ceased while just acts continued.
2. Sacrifices are performed by humanity, but even God practises justice.
3. Sacrifices have merit in this world, but justice is essential to the world to come.

Justice, of course, is a central teaching in Christianity. By reflecting on it through Jewish eyes we can better understand how Jesus was formed in his Jewish identity, and how deeply justice and righteousness were embedded in his person and teachings.

Reflection

Justice relates to how we treat the ‘poor’ and the ‘weakest’ in our midst; the ‘widow’ and ‘orphan,’ to use the language of Torah.

What does justice ‘look’ like in a family/household/parish setting, in the neighbourhood or workplace?

From the midrash

The appointment of judges can be compared to a king who had a favorite son and a precious garden. The king entrusted his precious garden to his beloved son. So too did God who loved nothing more than justice, entrust justice to God’s beloved child Israel, saying: ‘My children, by your life, as a result of respecting justice, I am exalted.’ (Deut.R.5.7 paraphrased)

Church congregations often find themselves divided into ‘camps.’ One camp promotes social justice causes, another camp promotes ‘community,’ and another focuses on prayer or liturgy... With the help of the midrash above, reflect on the intricate links between justice, relationships, and worship.

Sources: Bradley Artson, Parashah Shoftim commentary, 5769, American Jewish University, <http://judaism.ajula.edu>; Eskenazi & Weiss, *The Torah: A Women’s Commentary* (New York, 2008); Friedman, *Commentary on the Torah* (San Francisco, 2008); *Midrash Rabbah*, Vol.7 (London/New York: Soncino Press, 1983).

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