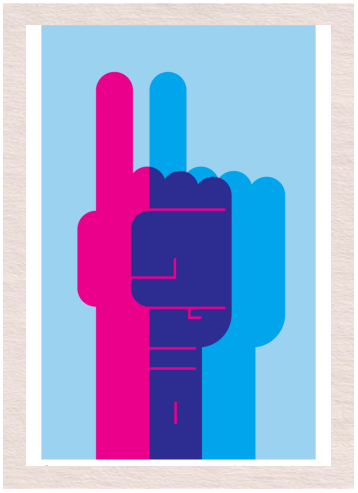
Shoftim: Devarim (Deuteronomy)

What's it all about?



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Moses instructs the Israelites to appoint justices and law enforcement officials in every city, commanding them **"justice, justice shall you pursue."** He commands them to investigate crimes meticulously, consider the evidence, and require a minimum of two credible witnesses. He also adds that in every generation, there will be those whose task it is to interpret the laws of the Torah.

The parsha also includes accounts of the prohibitions against idolatry and sorcery, the laws governing the behavior of the king, and instructions on creating cities of refuge. The laws of war are also recounted, and the parsha ends with the law of the *eglah arufah*, a process to be followed when a body is found in a field and the murderer is unknown, and that emphasizes the responsibility of the community that might have prevented the murder from happening.

"Is the tree of the field a man, who is able to come into the besieged city, fleeing from you?"

Take a deeper dive

Great leaders are known for many things: Some for their bravery, some for their wisdom, some for their long and successful tenures. Very few, however, are celebrated for their humility. Walk around any city of the world, and the large statues erected to celebrate great kings and generals, often by these men themselves, will assure you that whatever else these titans must've been, they weren't always the most humble.

And that, this week's parsha teaches us, is a problem.

When recounting the laws of appointing a king, Moses instructs his people that the king, immediately after being established on his throne, must write for himself a copy of the Torah and learn it every day. Why? So that he "not feel superior to his brethren or turn from the law to the right or to the left."

The king, in other words, must stay grounded, real, humble. "This," wrote the late Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, "is one of the genuine revolutions Judaism brought about in the history of spirituality. The idea that a king in the ancient world should be humble would have seemed farcical."

And yet, Rabbi Sacks reminded us, humility may not necessarily mean what we think it means. Rambam, the great Maimonides, taught us that a man may feel *shiflut*, or self-abasement, and he may feel pride. Humility is the middle ground between the two. Humility, wrote Rabbi Sacks, "means that you don't feel you have to prove yourself by showing that you are cleverer, smarter, more gifted, or more successful than others. You are secure because you live in God's love, He has faith in you even if you don't. You do not need to compare yourself to others. You have your task, they have theirs, and that leads you to co-operate, not compete."

These days, of course, it's hard to find a leader truly possessing this definition of humility. Politics these days are played out in large part on cable TV shows and social media platforms, where self-aggrandizement is the currency. To counter that, Rabbi Sacks reminded us of a great quote by Ezra Taft Benson, a farmer and the Secretary of Agriculture under President Eisenhower. **"Pride," he quipped, "is concerned with *who* is right; humility is concerned with *what* is right."** May we always merit leaders who know the difference.

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