

Let's turn the clock back a few weeks.

Arrived for work, walking through the Auditorium.

Here's Rabbi and she's introducing me to our Rabbinic intern. There's some friendly schmoozing and very nonchalantly, very low key, she mentions that there are some open dates for a d'var torah this summer and wouldn't I want to take one.

I'm thinking to myself, wait a minute this is Beth El.

We have fabulous clergy, trained educators, well educated congregants, professionals involved in Jewish education and the Rabbi is asking me to do a d'var torah? She must be in trouble and I have to help her. That's what I'm thinking. What I'm saying is I would be honored to take a date and thank you for asking me.

Drop off lunch, return to my desk, sit down, and the real panic sets in. I've just agreed to do what? What was I thinking? Then I remember that it is BE, we

are an observant congregation and people won't carry stuff into shul on Shabbat so the likelihood of being pelted with rotten fruit and eggs is minimal. I calm down.

Without saying a word the vibe travels down the hall from my office to the Rabbi's office. We meet once a week, don't recall if it was the same day or the next day but she has already sensed my anxiety and she's ready for me. As you would expect from our Rav, our teacher, she's selected a text, flagged the parsha. She flips through, recalls the subject matter and assures me that there is plenty of material to work with, nothing to worry about. And as our meeting ends and I'm leaving her office I'm almost sure that I heard her say something about the congregation occasionally being kind to first time presenters. So rabbi, thank you for asking me. For the rest of you, you have to go easy on me since it's my first time.

This brings us to the subject at hand – Parashat Shoftim. What I'd like to do is take a quick overview of the material in the parsha and then make a few points about some of the items that resonated with me.

We are instructed to have judges and officers in our gates, we are cautioned against idolatry and the consequences of that worship. There are laws governing having kings over the people. As we get ready to enter the Promised Land we are reminded about the worship practices of the people living there and how we must be different – no enchantresses, soothsayers, necromancers. Rather God will raise up prophets from among us for us to listen to. There is the instruction to establish the cities of refuge- an amazing concept. If someone takes a life without meaning to he has a protected place to flee to and live without being prosecuted. But if someone who is not entitled to flee to these cities takes refuge there,

he will be removed and delivered to the hand of the avenger and be put to death. There is a section about court procedure and how to treat a false witness.

There are some laws relating to how to conduct war against our enemies and the parsha concludes with the ritual that is performed when a corpse is found in a field and no one knows who struck the victim. So much for the quick overview and yes, there is plenty to work with.

One of the points that I made when I spoke here last – OK that was a Friday night so this is still my first time on a Shabbat morning...at BE – was that as Jews we are fortunate to have the torah reading cycle. We have a new text to study each week. One of the things that draws us here week after week is these words which are thousands of years old and yet we succeed in finding contemporary meaning in them. So what can we find in Shoftim?

Right at the beginning of the parsha, we have the injunction to have judges. If we mentally roll the scroll back to Parsha Yitro we recall that Moses was becoming overwhelmed with all of the demands on his time. People came at all hours of the day and night with their questions and concerns and he was involved in every aspect of the Israelites' lives. Now professionally, I can relate to this. So what did he do? He took the advice of his father in law and started to farm out the work to others. In current parlance we'd say he delegated the responsibility. He established a structure of assistants to take some of the work load from his shoulders and make it more manageable. Later in our current parsha, starting at 17:8, we read about matters that are too difficult for judges to decide. They are instructed to take those cases to the Levite priests to decide. The priests will pronounce judgment and their decision is to be followed. Again the current example would be what many of us face in our daily work situations. We

need advice about a course of action and we move it up the chain of command for a decision. Here we have this ancient text giving us advice about modern management practices. I'm only sorry that my former VP, Dennis Roth is away on vacation. In case you see him, please tell him that I know now where he got some of the advice that he passed along to me.

I want to share a personal recollection with you. When I was in high school, I also attended Gratz College high school. There I had one of the best teachers that I ever studied with, Rabbi Samuel Lachs of blessed memory. He taught us Pirke Avot. And I can still recall clearly one of his lessons in which he tried to bring a particular point across to us. He challenged us to listen to the text as he recited it: nefesh tachat nefesh, ayin b'ayin, shain b'shain, yad b'yad, regel b'regel in the original citation in Exodus, repeated here in Shoftim as nefesh b'nefesh, etc. He then asked us to establish the principle that was

underlying the text. Such was the brilliance of his pedagogy and presentation – I can still see him sitting in front of the class and still hear his voice as he called out the verse from memory - that he was able to get us to realize the lesson on our own without handing it to us. I was a teenager at the time and had heard the translation but this was the first time that I ever heard the Hebrew original. And I remember being unable to contain myself and calling out “equality”. That was the principle embodied in the text. I was rewarded with a smile from the rabbi for my reply. As Deut. restates much material from earlier books of the torah this passage is now repeated. More on it shortly.

And of course I cannot leave Shoftim without citing perhaps one of the most famous phrases, Tzedek, Tzedek Tirdof, Justice, Justice shall you pursue. Spoken this way it has a ring and a poetry all of its own. And it has a beautiful, active verb – tirdof. We

must go out to seek justice, to actively pursue it, almost run after it because it won't come to us. But why the repeated word? The text could have said Tzedek tirdof, pursue justice and be done with it. One of the principles of torah study is that there are no wasted words in the torah –each one is there for a reason and has a purpose. What do we see here? First we need to remember that our text is what is in the actual handwritten scroll, not what we can read today in printed volumes. And that handwritten text has only consonants, no vowels, no punctuation and sadly, no trope. So one way that biblical Hebrew adds emphasis to a phrase is to repeat a word. It makes a stronger presentation. Where else do we see this? I'm indebted to Howard Cooper who cited two examples last week that I will use again. I was listening to his d'var already mentally composing mine for today and knew that I would cite these two examples. So he has helped demonstrate one of my points – how we can look at the same phrase and

draw multiple meanings from it. It allows us to revisit a text again and again to glean new ideas. We hear God calling to Abraham in the Akedah story. You all remember the scene – Abraham has the knife in his hand, he is poised to make the sacrifice and God stops him by calling his name - twice. I think the first time he needs to break Abraham's concentration-he has been so intent to the task at hand and never considered stopping the process at any point along the way. So God must first get his attention and then he calls him again to signal that he is speaking to him.

Trope reference – p'seek. Without urgency.

The other example is Moses at the Burning Bush. As Howard mentioned last week, Moses is staring at the bush and God calls to him again twice – Moses, Moses. My interpretation is that Moses was staring at the bush fascinated by the fact that it wasn't being consumed but that God wanted Moses to pay

attention to the fact that God was present in that place and speaking to him, that he was on holy ground. In effect God was saying forget about the bush for a minute and concentrate on the big picture. Tzedek Tzedek repeats to remind us to pay attention when we pursue justice, to keep our minds on that task and know that God is speaking to us.

As I thought about TTD I recalled those equations that we learned in high school algebra, you know the ones with the parentheses. One term was spread out to apply to two arguments. I think that TTD can be broken apart and I picture a judge facing the parties to an action in his court room. He reminds them that court is not a place to wipe out our opponent but rather a place to seek redress of a grievance. He turns to one party and says TD and to the other and says TD. This temporal judge is backed up by the transcendent judge who has given us the phrase in the first place.

I don't know what court case might come to your mind but I have to tell you that one that I thought of was the recent suit against McDonalds by the customer who ordered a cup of coffee and burned himself when he spilled it. In the ideal world, I think that the judge would have thrown the case out.

Here's the scene a few thousand years ago. One of our ancestors walks into the original Six Pointed Star/bucks coffee bar in ancient Jerusalem, orders the first extra large cappuccino with a double shot of espresso with steamed milk and dry foam, takes it out and sits down in the saddle of his camel, spills the drink hurting himself and the animal. He brings his action to the local court and they don't need to send this one to the Levite priest for help. The judge says to him, Where's your saichel? You ordered a hot coffee – what did you think might happen? Case dismissed. Our modern day plaintiff was not seeking justice. He just wanted someone else to be

responsible for his stupidity. And now we all have printed warnings on cups to make sure we know that the coffee that we wanted really is hot.

The book of D itself tells us that we are not allowed to remove or add anything to the text, that all of the words are necessary. We also believe that the Torah is not randomly structured. So there must be a reason that the two phrases I've mentioned appear in the same parasha.

Like the two pans in the scale of justice our tradition teaches us that, yes, we are entitled to justice- TTD but nefesh b'nefesh, ayin b'ayin tells us how to pursue that justice. We must seek that justice with equality and come into court with "clean hands" and the proper frame of mind seeking only what is fair because that is all that we should get. This to me is the message of Parashat Shoftim.

S/S