

Parashah Shoftim

The one where rules are outlined to make sure a just and harmonious society will be built for the Israelites as they prepare to enter the Promised Land.

Parashah Shoftim begins by appointing judges and officers in every town and city. These officials are tasked with administering justice impartially and without bias. "Justice, justice shall you pursue." This parashah stresses the significance of a fair legal system, warning against bribery and corruption. It mentions a "shochad," which is a gift given to a judge after a court case has been settled.

Parashah Shoftim also lays out guidelines for the appointment of a king. It says that the king must be chosen from among the Israelites and that the king should not accumulate excessive wealth, horses, or foreign wives. These rules are put in place to prevent abuses of power and ensure that the king remains focused on the welfare of the people. It is also a way of making the leader a role model and example for the rest of the people.

The parashah introduces the concept of prophets and the importance of following their guidance. True prophets are distinguished by their ability to be a mouthpiece for God and follow the moral and ethical principles of the Torah. It warns against false prophets who may lead the people astray.

Parashah Shoftim contains guidelines for conducting warfare. It says that before engaging in battle, the Israelites must offer terms of peace to their enemies. Additionally, the parashah contains ethical instructions for dealing with the environment during wartime, such as not cutting down fruit trees unnecessarily and maintaining humane treatment of besieged cities.

The parashah addresses the establishment of cities of refuge for individuals who have unintentionally caused harm or committed manslaughter. These cities serve as sanctuaries where the accused can seek shelter until a fair trial is conducted. This law reflects a commitment to ensuring justice even in cases of accidental wrongdoing.

Parashah Shoftim provides a comprehensive framework for establishing a society based on justice, ethical leadership, and prophetic guidance. It addresses various aspects of governance, warfare, and legal practices, all aimed at creating a righteous and harmonious community as the Israelites prepare to enter the Promised Land.

Teen Takeaways from Parashah Shoftim

1. **Fairness matters:** Parashah Shoftim reminds us that fairness and justice are super important. Having rules that treat everyone equally helps create a fair society. The "shochad" referred to in the text is not technically a bribe given to a judge before a hearing. It is a gift given to the judge by the party in the case who prevails. If a judge is presiding over a trial in which one of the people is wealthier than the other, the judge might be led to decide in favor of the wealthier person, thinking that the "shochad" will be greater! This prevents the judge from being influenced too much by human nature. Judges are people, too.
2. **Choose leaders wisely:** The parashah talks about picking leaders who really care about us and our well-being.
3. **"Justice, justice shall you pursue" is one of the most quoted texts from the Bible.** The word is repeated so that we understand that we must always use just means to achieve just ends. We cannot violate principles of ethics in order to arrive at the right result.
4. **Listen to wise advice:** Parashah Shoftim tells us to listen to wise advice, like from a trusted adult or mentor, when we're confused or facing tough decisions. Do you think those who are our mentors, teachers, and parents should behave in an exemplary way?
5. **Do the right thing, even in tough times:** Even during challenging situations, we should try to do what's right and ethical.
6. **Give second chances:** Just like the cities of refuge give people a second chance, we should be understanding and forgiving when our friends make mistakes. Nobody's perfect! There is a difference between murder (intentional) and manslaughter (unintentional). Do you think the punishment should be different?
7. **Be cautious of bad influences:** It warns us about false prophets - people who might lead us down the wrong path. We should be careful about who we follow and make sure they're positive influences. People who claim to be "prophets" or claim that they have some secret knowledge should always make us suspicious.
8. **Prophets are not fortunetellers:** Nobody can predict the future, but based on experience with consequence, we can guess what certain behavior will lead to.
9. **Work together:** Parashah Shoftim shows that it's a team effort to make the world a better place. We all have a role in creating a just and caring community.
10. **Take care of the environment:** Protecting nature is important, even in tough times. It's like being eco-friendly and thinking about the planet's future. Jewish tradition was always a pioneer in these environmental issues.

Summary

Parashah Shoftim teaches us about **fairness, leadership, wise choices, doing what's right, forgiving others, being cautious, working as a team, and taking care of our environment.** These lessons help us become better people and create a kinder world.