

Justice, Justice You Shall Pursue

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By Rabbi Stuart W. Gershon

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The imperative of "justice, justice you shall pursue" has not only defined Jewish ethics. It has shaped the Jewish psyche. The Torah teaches us that the pursuit of justice is not just up to the judiciary, to the judges of a society. It is up to the people to make justice happen. Justice is up to us. Everyone has a stake in, and a moral obligation to pursue, justice in this world.

In the Torah reading for this Shabbat, we are introduced to one of the most grand and great principles of Jewish ethics. Please look with me at Deuteronomy 16:20: "Justice, justice you shall pursue," in Hebrew, "tzedek tzedek tirdof." This is a verse to remember. The imperative of "justice, justice you shall pursue" has not only defined Jewish ethics. It has shaped the Jewish psyche.

Now our Rabbis believed that the Torah was absolutely divine. Every word, every letter came directly from God. Nothing could be superfluous, and therefore the repetition of the word "justice" in verse twenty could not just be for emphasis. There had to be a deeper meaning to the repetition of the word "justice." So, one sage interprets the second "justice" to mean that we must pursue the cause of justice even if it causes us economic loss. Another sage interprets the second "justice" to mean that justice can be won only through just means.

Notice please that the Torah proclaims this principle within the context of a new system of judicial ethics that is to characterize Israelite society. Look at Deuteronomy 16:18-19: What do we learn about how this society is to conduct itself? Judges must be fair. Judges must be impartial. Judges must never accept a bribe.

Now, notice also, who appoints the magistrates and judges? Yes, the people. And who are the rules of judicial propriety addressed to, the judges or the people? It is the people! So the Torah teaches that the pursuit of justice is not just up to the judiciary, to the judges of a society. It is up to the people to make justice happen. Justice is up to us. Everyone has a stake in, and a moral obligation to pursue, justice in this world.

The new year of 5769 is quickly approaching. As we reflect upon our resolutions for the new year, two of the most important questions we need to ask ourselves are these: what have I done lately to pursue the cause of justice in this world? What will I do to pursue the cause of justice in the coming year?

To inspire us to the cause of justice and to proclaim that it is time for all of us to prepare spiritually for the new year, we now hear the traditional blasts of the shofar.