

Dvar Torah Parashat Shoftim
Given at UJC Metrowest's Women's Dept Opening Event
September 9, 2005

My parents taught me to treat each person standing before me with respect and consideration. You treat with respect those who deserve respect...and that is everyone who crosses your path, from our rabbi to our garbage collector and everyone in between, because we are all citizens of the world and God's creation.

My parents didn't say it the way I do...they taught the values through their stance in the world and through their actions. It was as obvious to them that you give to Federation and to support Israel as it was that you treat people equally no matter the color of their skin, from what neighborhood they come, their religion or their sexual orientation.

One of the guiding principles of Judaism and of my own rabbinate is the foundational concept of b'tzelem Elohim, that we are all created in God's image and therefore sacred vessels deserving care and respect. We must take care of our own selves because we are sacred and we must take care of each other.

When we look to this week's parasha, the Torah is clear. Not only should we take care of each other, we must set up our society so that its institutions and organizations pursue Justice. Tzedek, Tzedek Tirdof....The parasha starts quite simply....

You shall appoint judges and police (magistrates and officials) for your tribes, in all the settlements that I the Lord your God is giving you...

The verse is worded in the singular. Why is that? The Hasidic teacher Rabbi Levi Yitzhak of Berdichev taught on this parasha that this verse is not only describing a process of communal organization and structure but also an individual process we each must participate in....

Rabbi Levi Yitzhak of Berdichev, disciple of the Maggid of Mezerich, leader of Hasidic movement in 18th century

b.1740 d.1810

The Holy Blessed One will judge the community of Israel on the Day of Judgment with the greatness of Divine merciful love and grace. But there must be an action below which arouses this quality of merciful love above. We arouse that quality of merciful love when we, here below, act in grace, defending the merits of every Jew and judging him or her positively. By these acts, that quality of merciful love is aroused on high (in Heaven) and, then, the merits of whoever so acted and indeed of all the seed of Israel are defended and grace granting... This is the meaning of [the first verse of this reading], “judges and police shall you set for yourself in all your gates” (Deut 16:18); to wit, that you, yourself, must set in order and prepare the judgment on high by the gates which you make and which you open with your deeds.

Levi Yitzhak is teaching that not only do we understand that we are b'tzelem elohim and must follow God's ways....but God's will also look to us as

Divine images and will be led to act because of how we function in the world.

And what must we do...in these days of Elul, in these weeks before Rosh HaShanah, Yom HaDin, the day of judgment...we must arouse God's mercy and love by acting with mercy and love.

How can we do this? By reaching out to our fellow human beings around the world who are suffering—by continuing to speak out against the atrocities in Darfur, by continuing to support the survivors of Hurricane Katrina who will need our help for months and months, and by continuing to stand by our brothers and sisters in Israel who are striving to build a just and democratic society that can guarantee its citizens—Jew and nonJew—peace, security and freedom. But we must also, Rab Levi Yitzhak teaches lower our gaze and look at what lies before us—the people we encounter every day—family, friends and strangers. We must ask ourselves how we can treat them with more love and mercy rather than judgment and rigidity. We must help our fellow Jews and neighbors who need support in our own communities through Federation...and we must help our fellow Jew when she asks for our help.....

May this new year be filled with hope and promise for us all, may it be a year of more peace than war, a year of justice triumphing over oppression, and a year that finds us all sitting here again raising money to help our fellow Jews and reaching out to each other with shalom, bracha u'tzedekah.