

*Parshat Shoftim - 5772 - Temple Beth Israel, Waltham, Massachusetts*

Shabbat shalom ... it's good to be back with you all today.

With the stirring words of the prophet Isaiah still ringing in our ears - *uri, uri ! ... hit-orreri, hit-orreri !... "wake up!", "wake up!" ... kumi ! ... get up ... liv'shi bigdei tifareikh ...* put on the garments of your splendor! ... I am reminded that it's been said more than once that a primary function of religion, and of spiritual practice, is simply to remind us ... to wake up.

This week being the beginning of the month of Elul, we're called to hear, and be challenged by, the deep and primal sounding of the shofar each weekday. Wake up! Who are you - why are you here? Pay attention! The Day of Judgment is approaching !

Ah - that judgment thing ... a personal story: sometime around 15 years ago, I was beginning to find my way back into Jewish practice, and Hebrew text. And I found myself quite enamored by the service of Kabbalat Shabbat, of welcoming the Sabbath with joyful song and psalms. So one Friday night, I decided to sit down and read through those psalms a bit more slowly than I had done before. And I found beautiful exhortations to rise up and sing, to celebrate the majesty of creation, the holiness of being ... and then I stopped, when I found ... judgment ... For not one, but two of these psalms conclude essentially with "Here's comes the Judge!" *Ki va lish-pot ha-aretz* - Here he comes to judge the world, and it all sounded so, well, judgmental. Arrgh. "*Lish-pot*" - to judge ... "*Mish-pat*" ... a judgment ... *shofeit* - a judge. Shin-Peh-Tet.

Sometime later, I discovered a wonderful book, by Mattisyahu Clark, called "An Etymological Dictionary of Hebrew Verb Roots". Here he gives, for each verb found in the Bible, not just the plain meaning, but the cognitive cluster of related meanings. And there, listed under Shin-peh-tet, I was delighted to find a secondary meaning: not simply to judge, but also: "to harmonize".

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So here we are in today's Torah, in the parsha of *Shoftim*, of "harmonizers". And so, a fitting time to reflect, in this, the month of Elul, on the current state of harmony in our lives, our families, our communities, and our world - to evaluate, to judge - if you will - and to consider the ways in which we each might, even in some small way, improve upon our individual and collective capacity to serve as "harmonizers": to increase the level of harmony in our lives, our families, our communities, our world.

In a section of Pirkei Avot which is found in the morning liturgy for each day, we are each exhorted to "*ohev shalom v'rodeif shalom*" ... not only to love peace, but also to pursue peace. Similarly, in one of the psalms we sing on shabbat and holiday mornings, we have: *Mi ha-ish he-hafetz chayim* ? ... Who is the person who desires and truly appreciates life? ... and the response concludes "*bakeish shalom v'rod-fei-hu*" - seek peace, and pursue it.

In the beginning of parshat Shoftim comes a call to another form of pursuit: *Tzedek Tzedek tirdof* ... commonly translated "Justice, Justice shall you pursue".

Much has been written by way of interpretation of this phrase. Rashi, for example, reads the continuation "so that you may live, and inherit the land" to mean that only by maintaining a just society will the people Israel be able to maintain their connection to the land of Israel.

And various reasons have been offered for the doubling of the word "*Tzedek*" - Justice. One common reading is that we must not only pursue justice itself, but must also only just means to pursue it. Nachmanides, the Ramban, reads the doubling of *Tzedek* as saying that for a just society, not only do we need just judges and justice at a communal level, but also each of us, as individuals are required to act justly.

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Notice that *Tzedek* is also the root of "*Tzedakah*", so that, rather than just the common reading of *Tzedakah* as charity, in its fullest sense, it means simply doing the right thing.

This week I found myself most drawn to an explanation put forth in the writings of Rabbi Sholom Berezovsky in his book *Netivot Shalom* - the pathways of peace. He begins by pointing out that the original translation of the Torah into Aramaic renders the word *Tzedek*, not as Justice, but rather, as "Truth". He then poses the question of the doubling, asking - but Truth is Truth, isn't it? How can there be more than one truth? Ah, he answers, but yes! - for there is not only the intellectually correct truth of mind and knowledge, but is there not also the truth of the heart, the truth of the kishkes? And, he continues, can justice be complete, and completely true, unless we have somehow integrated these two forms of truth?

Pursue, pursue ... a continual striving for betterment ... *Lo alekha ligmor* ... we may not be able to complete the task, but there is always room to improve.

<here insert synopsis of Medical School story in section on  
"Communities of Truth" from Parker Palmer, *The Courage to Teach*>

So ... pursue, pursue ... pursue Justice, pursue Truth ... pursue Shalom.

And what is the connection between Justice, Truth, and Shalom? Let's understand that the Hebrew word *shalom* means much more than simply "peace" ... to ask of a person's "*shalom*" is to inquire about their complete state of well-being; indeed, *shalom* shares the same Hebrew root as the word "*Shaleim*", meaning wholeness, completeness. It's also the term used for paying a bill or debt, that is, the act of restoring completeness or balance. So in justice and truth, by doing "*tzedek*" - the right thing, we work to restore balance, , to integrate mind and heart, intention and action, receiving and giving - in completeness, in *shalom* / *sheleimut*. "*Tamim tih'yeh im adonai elohekha*" says the Torah ... You

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shall be fully complete, with the One your God.

So as we walk our individual and collective paths through the reflections of Elul, and the Days of Awe to follow, may we each be blessed to heed the shofar's wake up call, and be graced with the insight, and the courage, and the divine compassionate grace, to continue pursuing the right path, and in so doing, fulfill the prime directive of "*vey'heh beracha*" to be a blessing - to invite and bring more harmony and wholeness into our families, our communities, and our world.

Shabbat shalom.