

Dvar Torah

Parshat shoftim is part of a speech given by Moses, the long time leader of the Israelites. The people are about to enter the land of Israel and Moses knows that he will not be going with them because he is about to die.

In this, one of his last speeches, he chooses to present a plan for the pursuit of justice within the society. I would like to focus on an important message that I derived from this reading and discuss its meaning to me in terms of some current events and personal experiences.

Let me begin with Moses' repetition of "justice, justice, shall you pursue".

Many wonder why the word justice is repeated, because the torah does not often repeat words. Some scholars suggests that this repetition is simply the way in which the torah forms an exclamation point or idea. By repeating the word Tzedek, Moses underscores the importance of pursuing justice as a means for the community's survival.

Others argue that the phrase is repeated to get across that the idea that pursuing justice is not only the responsibility of our government and appointed judges within our society, but it is also a mitzvah- a commandment -that every individual should not remain silent in the presence of injustice, but rather take action.

It has been said “ if a person is neither a scholar nor a teacher, nor known for observing all the ritual commandments, but stands up to protest against evil, such a person is called a blessing.”

Evil has many faces in our world. We can see the face of evil in an affluent society like ours when it turns its back on those who are living in poverty and starving. Whether that is happening here, right before our eyes, or anywhere in the world.

I learned a lesson in that regard on May 31 st when I reluctantly attended the Walk to End Poverty put on by the Agah Kahn foundation ,that united, the Christian, Ismaili and Jewish communities, to walk together to eradicate world poverty.

When I realized that my other friends going to the walk just dropped out, I quickly picked up the phone and dialled my dad trying to call it off. When he

answered he seemed pretty adamant about us going. He said that since none of my friends were going, it was now more important that we go!

While initially it wasn't so fun, it was an experience I will never forget. We joined and were part of this diverse group of people and cultures all walking together to bring awareness to the principle that it is NOT OK to have other humans starving in the world around us when we can do something about it to help eliminate their poverty and improve their lives.

Later after the walk they announced that we had raised over 1.5 million dollars that day. It was a great feeling knowing that I didn't stay home or go to a friend's house to play and as a result remain a silent observer of the great misfortune of others because lets be honest with ourselves - if we, with our level of comfort and security don't take action to do what is right, then our silence is evil- don't you think??

This experience with "The Walk to End Poverty", was just one of the many incredible learning opportunities provided to me by an especially inspiring educator, Morah Shoshi over the past several months. She was determined to find the way, using her abundance of creativity and

ingenuity, to teach us about valuing human dignity and being responsible for others.

I learned many valuable lesson from her this year through her efforts to put together so many amazing projects that were both fun and educational. The RAC race was her first project with us. It was a team RACE where we had to perform Random Acts of Kindness. I went in thinking it was going to be a waste of time and came out shocked to find out how one act of kindness can affect the rest of someones day. Go out try it and you'll see that their smile won't only light up their day but yours too.

Another time, I learned a wonderful lesson in her chesid class, when she brought in a homeless person named Fred to talk to the class. He talked about how he ended up in the tough situation he was in. While his story was depressing it was a lesson that people are often in certain difficult situations for good reasons. They may have not gotten all the same advantages that many of us have received and may take for granted. Therefore it is not fair to make disrespectful presumptions about how they got to were they are as a homeless person. For instance it wouldn't be appropriate to say they are homeless because they are lazy or stupid. Everyone has a

story. Test out what I'm saying -maybe talk to a homeless person, treat them with due respect and see if I'm right.

Finally I want to talk about Tzedaka which means charity in Hebrew and its relationship to the word Tzedek - Justice. This is no coincidence. From this relationship we understand that giving charity is not to be considered as an optional choice in judaism but as a requirement for all jews to ensure that justice is carried out in the world.

That is why we regard Tzedakah as a mitzvah -a fundamental commandment.

Think of Tzedek- justice- as the guiding principle and from that comes Mitzvas commandments, and through that comes Tzedaka the responsibility to give charity .

My family is very involved in charity work. My dad, amongst his other charitable activities, is the Chair of the Jewish Federation of Greater Vancouver's Annual Campaign- that raises 8 million dollars for our community organizations.

My mom is the President of the JCC. Seeing all the time and effort they put in to our community, made me feel like I wanted to get in on the action. Luckily I

got to see what it was all about through my MVP project at school. Where everyone in the class collects money to pool together. Then the class makes a consensus decision on how to distribute the funds. I got such a great feeling from being part of the MVP experience. That is why I am going to give ten percent of my bar mitzvah money to charity as the torah commands all jews to give ten percent of their first fruits to the needy. As a Jew I too am commanded to fulfill that mitzvah and do so with great pride.

I have tried to illustrate what I understand from the bible and through various rabbinic commentaries, which is that; the pursuit of justice in its many forms, is a critical and central concern of Jewish society. Jews are commanded to pursue justice because no human community can survive without it. The cornerstone of jewish ethics is to actively seek out opportunities to create justice for all, because where justice is done; peace and truth will prevail.

Before I conclude I would like to thank my teachers; Kathe, Rabbi Moskovitz, Rabbi Brown, Cantor Taussig. I would like to thank my brother and sister for being so supportive of me throughout my bar mitzvah studies. I would also like to thank my

parents, who have been wonderful teachers and role models living the messages they try to help myself and my brother and sister to understand, so that we can be better people.