

ג"ה

Justice, Justice
Rabbi Zev-Hayyim Feyer

Parshat Shoftim

Judges and officers you shall make yourself . . . and they shall administer righteous judgment for the people. (Deuteronomy 16:18)

The traditional understanding of this, the opening verse of this week's Torah reading, is that judges and law enforcement officers are to be named by and for the people. But there is another, perhaps a deeper, meaning.

Judges and officers you shall make for yourself. Yes, but also, judges and officers you shall make *of* yourself. The Hassidic master Rebbe Simcha Bunam of Pshischa, whose *yahrzeit* (the anniversary of his passing from this life) we will observe on the 12th of Elul, less than two weeks from now, understands this verse to teach us that, before passing judgment on others, one must first pass judgment on oneself. With the spiritual masters of virtually every faith tradition around the world, Rebbe Simcha Bunam observes that one can see in others only the faults which exist in oneself, and one can judge fairly the shortcomings of others only when one has acknowledged those shortcomings in oneself.

Rebbe Simcha Bunam points to the sequence of this verse. Only after one judges oneself – **you shall make judges of/for yourself** – after one judges oneself with thorough and uncompromising honesty, says the sequence of this verse, as Rebbe Simcha Bunam reads it, can one judge others – **administer righteous judgment for the people**.

And we then read (v. 20), **Justice, justice shalt thou pursue**. Traditionally, we have understood this to mean that it is not only the outcome of our actions which must be just; we must also use only just means in arriving at those results. The ends do not justify the means; the means may taint the ends. Furthermore, we must have not only the fact of justice but the appearance of justice as well.

But now, in the light of Rebbe Simcha Bunam's interpretation of the earlier verse, we can understand **Justice, justice shalt thou pursue** also as a reminder of the two-step process – only by administering justice (which includes honest judgment) to ourselves are we enabled to administer justice to others.

To the ability and willingness to judge ourselves justly, may we speedily be led.

Shabbat shalom.