

# A Taste of Text: Source based learning for Shabbat

*This weekly sheet is brought to you by **Rabbi Dr. Moshe Freedman** of the **New West End United Synagogue** in conjunction with **Shapell's/Darché Noam***

## PARSHAT SHOFTIM

### DVAR TORAH: THE CHASE

"צדק צדק תרדף" – We are told in our Parshah (Devarim 16:20) to chase after justice. We are also told in Tehillim "בקש שלום ורדפהו" – not only to seek out peace, but to chase after it. What is the special connotation of this verb לרדף, to chase, in conjunction with values like peace and justice? How is chasing after justice or peace different than just acting justly or peacefully?

First of all, three points about this kind of a chase:

1. Sometimes someone we want to be with us runs away from us.
2. In order to catch him we must run more quickly than he does. But there is a third point:
3. If we want him to stay with us we must remove that which caused him to run away in the first place.

Here's an example of this kind of a chase: A major organization makes its annual dinner at a fancy hotel, and 500 guests fill a large hall. The keynote speaker, a world-famous author and professor, was specially flown in for the event. Suddenly, right before the speeches are to begin, a grimace appears on the keynote speaker's face, and he gets up and swiftly exits the hall. The head of the organization chases after him, finally catching up with him a block away from the hotel. "What happened Professor?" asks the organization head. "I'm very allergic to peanuts," he answered, "and felt a severe reaction coming on and had to get as far away from the hotel as quickly as possible." Sure enough, the hotel's chef had been preparing a desert for the 500 guests that included peanut-butter and the hotel kitchen was exuding clouds of toxic peanut vapors. So in order to continue the dinner as planned the kitchen staff had to remove the brownies and the hotel set up large fans to blow the vapors out of the hall.

Let's now plug it into our verses: We want justice and peace; but they run quickly away from our society, for it is full of the self-interest that breeds corruption and the ego that causes dissent and fragmentation.

In order to make our society a just and a peaceful one – in order to catch justice and peace – we must chase them – running towards justice and peace more quickly than they're running away from us. Our drive towards good values must be more energetic and more powerful – faster than they run away from us.

But in order to hold on to justice and peace we must remove the causes of their flight. We must blow away the vapors of self-interest and ego and replace them with altruism and humility. Then Hashem will bless us with the rest of the verse – "למען תחיה וירשת את הארץ אשר ה' אלקיך נתן לך" – so you will live and inherit the Land that Hashem gives you" (Devarim 16:20).

## SOURCE GUIDE: TREES, ONE-STONE ALTARS, & BLEMISHES

The beginning of Parshat Shoftim seems to quickly jump from one topic to another. It begins with appointing judges and pursuing justice; then it shifts to the prohibitions against 1. planting trees next to the altar; 2. putting up one-stone altars; and 3. offering blemished sacrifices. This source guide builds on the Sforno's suggestion, that the three seemingly out-of-place mitzvot develop a unified theme.

### A. Seemingly Unconnected Laws

After the first three verses of our Parshah, the Torah seems to shift topics:

<p><b>1. Devarim 16:18 – 17:1</b>                  (18) Set up judges and law enforcement officials for yourself in all your cities that the Hashem your G-d gives you for your tribes; and they shall judge the people [with] righteous judgment. (19) Do not pervert justice; you shall not show favoritism; and you shall not take a bribe, for bribery blinds the eyes of the wise and perverts just words. (20) Justice, justice you should pursue; so that you will live and possess the land that Hashem your G-d gives you. (21) You shall not plant for yourself an asherah, [or] any tree, near the altar of Hashem your G-d which you make for yourself. (22) Do not set up for yourself a matzevah, which Hashem your G-d hates. (1) Do not sacrifice to Hashem your G-d an ox or a sheep that has in it a blemish or any bad thing; for that is an abomination to Hashem your G-d.</p>	<p><b>דברים טז:יח – יז:א</b>                  (יח) לשפטים ושופרים תתן לה בכל                  לשעריך אשר ה' אלקיך נתן לה לשבטיך                  ושפטו את העם משפט צדק. (יט) לא                  תטה משפט לא תפיר פנים ולא תקח שחד                  כי השחד יעור עיני חכמים ויסלף דברי                  צדיקים. (כ) צדק צדק תרדף למען תקנה                  וירשת את הארץ אשר ה' אלקיך נתן לה.                  (כא) לא תטע לה אשרה כל עץ אצל                  מזבח ה' אלקיך אשר תעשה לה. (כב)                  ולא תקים לה מצבה אשר שגא ה' אלקיך.                  (א) לא תזבח לה' אלקיך שור ושה אשר                  יהיה בו מום כל דבר רע כי תועבת ה'                  אלקיך הוא.</p>
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Verses 18-20 begin to discuss the justice system, then 21 makes a radical shift, prohibiting planting an asherah (a tree worshipped as an idol) or other trees next to the altar. Verse 22 seems to continue the rules of altars, forbidding a מצבה (according to Rashi this is a one-stone altar, contrast with a מזבח, made of many stones). But verse 1 of the next chapter forbids sacrificing animals with blemishes – a totally new topic.

In the Sefer Torah, there is a break after verse 20, after verse 22, and after verse 23.

### B. The Sforno's Suggestion

The Sforno (Harav Ovadiah Sforno, זצ"ל, 1475-1550, Italy) suggests that all three have the following in common:

<p><b>2. Sforno on Devarim 16:21</b>                  It brings three similar topics: things that are aesthetically beautiful (literally, “according to the sense”) but abominable because of their spiritual flaws.</p>	<p><b>ספורנו על דברים טז:כא</b>                  הביא שלשה דומים מענין דברים שהם                  נאים כפי החוש ונמאסים מפני מומם                  הרוחני.</p>
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The asherah is an example:

<p><b>3. Sforno on Devarim 16:21</b>                  First is the asherah [or any tree at all], which is an adornment to temples. Nevertheless, it is abominable for holiness because it was part of idolatrous ceremony.</p>	<p><b>ספורנו על דברים טז:כא</b>                  ראשונה היא האשרה שהיא לנוי היכלות.                  ומ"מ היתה נמאסת לקדש מפני שהיתה                  תכסיס לעבודת גלולים.</p>
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According to the Sforno, each one of these laws – the asherah, the matzevah, and the blemish – is also a metaphor for an unacceptable judge. This explains why the Torah places them here:

<p><b>4. Sforno on Devarim 16:21</b>                  Similarly, we are to prefer spiritual justice over the judge's physical perfection, which is merely of the [external] senses and physical.</p>	<p><b>ספורנו על דברים טז:כא</b>                  וכן נקדים העדפת הצדק הרוחני לשלמות                  גוף הדיין שהוא חושיי וגשמי.</p>
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The Torah here teaches us about priorities. Even though external beauty has its place in halachah – the principle of hiddur mitzvah requires making sure that mitzvah objects are not only valid but also beautiful – beauty is secondary to spirituality and morality. A beautiful tree planted near a lofty temple creates an aesthetically pleasing picture and makes a great impression. But the tree’s association with the idolatrous asherah trees that adorned pagan temples invalidates it. Aesthetics is secondary to spirituality.

The Torah here teaches us to apply the same principle to the justice system, says the Sforno. Though a strong and handsome judge might make a great impression and add to the honor of his office, appearance is a secondary consideration when appointing judges. The primary value of justice must take precedence over the secondary value of honor. When choosing between two judges, the one that is a little more just should be preferred over the one whose appearance is a little more impressive.

We learn the same from the Torah’s invalidation of a one-stone altar:

<p><b>4. Sforno on Devarim 16:21</b>          Second is the one-stone altar, that even though it was desired by Hashem before the giving of the Torah, as it says, “and [Moshe put up] twelve one-stone altars” (Shemot 24:4) [it is still considered invalid]. The concept behind the one-stone altar was that it was as if the person making an offering was always standing before [G-d’s] holiness (the word מצבה is related to the word נצב, standing). It is the same concept as the verse, “I place G-d before me constantly” (Tehillim 16:8). But Israel fell from that level through the Golden Calf episode, as it says, “For I will not go up in your midst” (Shemot 33:3). This will also happen with regards to an elder who did not have a good reputation as a youth, that when you find an elder who had a good reputation even as a youth [the latter is preferred].</p>	<p><b>ספורנו על דברים טז:כא</b>          שנית המצבה, שאע"פ שהיתה לרצון קודם מתן תורה כאמרו "ושתים עשרה מצבה" (שמות כד:ד), וזה כי היה ענינה כאלו המקריב נצב תמיד לפני הקדש כענין "שויתי ה' לנגדי תמיד" (תהילים טז:ח). ונפלו מזאת המדרגה בענין העגל כאמרו שם "כי לא אעלה בקרבך" (שמות לג:ג). וכן יקרה בענין זקן שאין פרקו נאה שיצא עליו שם רע בילדותו כשתמצא זקן ופרקו נאה.</p>
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The law of sacrificial blemishes teaches a related lesson:

<p><b>5. Sforno on Devarim 16:21</b>          Third, it brings the matter of the blemish, considered abominable even though the animal looks externally beautiful, fat and worth a thousand zuz coins. Nevertheless it is still invalid for a holy [sacrifice] because of its blemish, even though it doesn’t even detract from its value. In contrast, an ox that is only worth one sela coin but is unblemished is valid as a sacrifice. Similarly, an elder who has a bad character trait is rejected in favor of another whose character is better, even though the first is more wealthy and handsome than the second.</p>	<p><b>ספורנו על דברים טז:כא</b>          שלישית, הביא ענין המום, הנמאס אע"פ שתהיה הבהמה יפה כפי החוש ושמנה שוה אלף זוז. ועם כל זה היא נפסלת לקדש מפני מום בלתי מחסר מדמים. ויהיה שור שוה סלע בשביל היותו תמים כשר לקרבן. וכן יהיה בזקן בעל מדה מגונה כשתמצא שלם ממנו במדות אע"פ שלא יהיה עשיר ונאה כמוהו.</p>
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The Maharik (Harav Yosef Kolon, זצ"ל, 1420-1480, Italy), quoted by Harav Yehudah Cooperman, זצ"ל, (1929-2016, Israel) in his extensive footnotes on the Sforno’s commentary, took a similar direction in a responsum. According to the Maharik (Responsum 117), the asherah, matzevah, and blemishes allude to the following three types of invalid judges. An evil judge is like an asherah tree; an unlearned judge is like a matzevah; and a judges with a bad reputation is like a sacrifice with a blemish.

### C. Additional Learning

External appearances: See the aggadic anecdotes about Rabbi Yehudah on Nedarim 49b and about Rabbi Yehoshua ben Chananyah and Rav Yehudah on Nedarim 50b.

## THE GATES OF ELUL BY RABBI YITZCHAK LERNER

“שופטים ושוטרים – Judges and officers – תתן לך בכל שעריך – you shall place for yourselves in all your gates” (Devarim 16:18). The question is: Why does the Torah use the word “gates” as opposed to “cities”? On a simple level – “pashut pshat” – Rashi tells us that it indeed does mean “your cities.” But, in the end, the Torah still uses the word “gates” and not “cities.” This nuance gives us a license to enter the world of “drash.”

The Nesivos Shalom (the previous Slonimer Rebbe, Harav Shalom Noach Brozofsky, 2000-1911 זצ"ל), suggests that “gates” in our verse is a metaphor, and alludes to the many gates in our lives as Jews.

In one month from now we will find ourselves in the heat of the Yamim Noraim, the Days of Awe. The Nesivos Shalom suggests that the month of Elul is a gate to these days. It opens us up and helps us enter the Yamim Noraim. And, like the pasuk says, we must put up guards and judges at our gates.

The main theme of Rosh Hashanah is to coronate Hashem over ourselves, to make Him our מלך, our King. The verse in Tehillim (34:15) which we recite each Shabbos says, “סור מרע ועשה טוב – Turn from the bad and [then] do good.” In order to be able to do good you must first turn from the bad. In order to be really prepared for the good that we’ll be doing during Rosh Hashanah, we first must go through the gates of Elul.

The shofar that we hear blowing each and every morning during the month of Elul can serve as the guard we place at the gates of Elul. It should be used to “wake us up.” The shofar asks us: Are we changing? Are we doing teshuvah? The Rambam, in Hilchos Teshuvah (7:3), tells us that not only must we do teshuvah on transgressions like stealing; but we must also do teshuvah on our character traits. The shofar also asks us: Are we, in fact, working on ourselves?

This is one of the main aspects of our 'עבודת ה' (service of G-d) in of the month of Elul: to turn away from our negative character traits in order to be able to do good on Rosh Hashanah. First comes “סור מרע – turning away from bad.” Then, after we go through the gates of Elul, we can fulfill “עשה טוב – doing good” through the Yamim Noraim.

May we all merit an Elul where we can proudly proclaim “אני לדודי ודודי לי – I am to my Beloved as my Beloved is to me” (Shir Hashirim 6:3).

שבת שלום ומבורך

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*This publication is compiled by the staff and Rabbonim at **Shapells/Yeshivat Darché Noam** for men and **Midreshet Rachel v'Chaya Seminary** for women in Jerusalem. Find out more about the **married couples' programme** and the **Pathways Israel** and **Pathways Plus** programmes offered at [www.darchenoam.org](http://www.darchenoam.org) +972-2-651-1178, 5 Beit Hakerem Street, Jerusalem.*

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