



## **Justice – It Doesn't Come Easy**

*Parashat Shoftim*  
(Deuteronomy 16:18 to 21:9)

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If you listen to NPR you have probably heard the announcer thank the John D. & Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation for supporting their broadcast. Do you remember their tagline or mission? It's "building a more just, verdant, and peaceful world." The word "just" stood out because one of the most famous verses in the Torah (*Tzedek, tzedek tirdof* -- "justice, justice shall you pursue") is found in this week's *parsha*.

I'd like to comment on two words of this verse.

First, it's interesting to note that the word "tzedek" or "justice" is translated as "*kushta*" or "truth" in the Aramaic Targum. The connection between justice and truth is reinforced in *Pirkei Avot* (1:18): "Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel said: the world rests on three things -- (*din*) justice, (*emet*) truth, and (*shalom*) peace." Justice, based on truth, leads to peace. On the other hand justice, based on corruption or preconceived notions, leads to disaster.

The second interesting word, "*tirdof*" (*run after justice*), implies that a passive approach to achieving a just world is not enough. We don't have *mitzvot* that invite us to be merely spectators. Instead, much of our Tradition contains active verbs: "build Jerusalem" or "love peace" or "fix the world." Look at the name of our synagogues: Rodeph Shalom (Pursuers of Peace) or Rodeph Tzedek (Pursuers of Justice). While we may not do enough physical exercise (I'm guilty too!), we at least see ourselves as *actively* improving the world.

In fact, one could argue that this kind of active engagement with the world, rather than just taking care of our internal Jewish needs, is our reason for being. As my colleague Rabbi Brad Artson wrote: "We cannot consider ourselves pious Jews without a firm commitment to making the world a more just and righteous place. One cannot claim to love God and not be passionate about justice. That is the primary Jewish contribution to the human spirit."

The take home message: justice doesn't come easy. You have to work at it. You have to be thoughtful and clever to avoid creating injustices. And you have to be on the lookout for, and respond to, injustices when they inevitably occur. Whether it's on the international level, or on the playground, it takes initiative, courage and work to achieve justice. It doesn't happen by itself.

So much of life requires us to be active participants. You want to feel better? Change your eating habits and exercise! You want your children to grow up and be *mentches*? Work hard at parenting!

I leave you with the wisdom of Richard Starkey (better known as Ringo Starr of the Beatles):

I don't ask for much, I only want your trust,  
And you know it don't come easy.  
Peace, remember peace is how we make it,  
Here within your reach  
If you're big enough to take it.