

Shof'tim

שפטים

“Judges”

Deuteronomy 16:18 – 21:9

Torah Together



This *Torah* portion contains God’s word (through Moses) on a variety of topics, encouraging the Israelites to be diligent about administering their new nation in obedience to His commands. Of particular interest is the clear prophecy of the coming Messiah in **Deuteronomy 18:14-20**.

1. Judges - 16:18-20

Where were judges to come from and how were they chosen? What was the primary responsibility of a judge? What would result from faithfully carrying out their duties?

Judges were appointed from each of the tribes in every town. In deciding cases, the primary duty of the judge was to “judge the people fairly,” (verse 18) showing no partiality. If they “followed justice and justice alone,” they would “live and possess the land God was giving them” (verse 20).

2. Worshiping Other Gods - 16:21 - 17:7

a) How does God feel about setting up other items related to worship near His altar? How does He feel about the sacrifice of imperfect or defective animals?

Verse 16:21 says God “hates” items related to worship of other gods set up next to his altar. This is a manifestation of God’s jealousy. He also says that the sacrifice of imperfect animals is “detestable” to him.

b) What was to be done if someone was suspected of worshipping other gods? What was to be done if the person is found guilty? What was required for a guilty verdict?

Any case of worship of other gods must be “thoroughly investigated” (verse 4). If it was found to be true (confirmed by the testimony of two or more witnesses), then the person was to be “stoned to death at the city gate” (verse 5). This was done to purge the evil from among the people (verse 7).

In God’s plan for the new nation of Israel, judges had great responsibility. It was essential that they be completely committed to “justice and justice alone” for the society to function properly. Do you think this still holds true today?

It seems clear that God takes the worship of other gods very seriously. What insight does this give you into God’s character?

This is the first occurrence of a “court of appeals” or “Supreme Court” much like we have in today’s legal system. Note that the judges needed to be experts in the law (*Torah*).

It is certainly interesting that God gives instructions to the Israelites concerning the king that they would someday have. See the first “Digging Deeper” question at the end of this section for more discussion on this topic.

Scripture Link:
Numbers 18 discusses the duties of the priests and Levites and explains their inheritance in verse 20.

3. Law Courts - 17:8-13

What procedure was followed if a local court could not come to a verdict in a particular case? Where and to whom were such cases referred? What role do the Levites play?

If local judges could not decide local cases because they were too complex or difficult, then they were to be taken to the Levites in the “place God will choose,” Jerusalem. There, “the judge who is in office at that time” (verse 9) along with the Levites will decide the case and their judgments were final.

4. The King - 17:14-20

a) When the Israelites decided to appoint a king over themselves, whom were they to choose? How was this king to behave?

When (not if) the Israelites decided to appoint a king over themselves, the man must be chosen by God. (See “Digging Deeper” question at end of lesson.) The man was not to be a foreigner and was not to acquire great numbers of horses (military power), silver (wealth), or wives (which they did). Also, the king was not to lead the people back to Egypt.

b) After the king took his throne, what was he to do? Can you see how this might be helpful for a king? What benefits might come from this practice?

The king was to write for himself a copy of the Torah and was to keep it and read it all of his days. This would help keep a king be humble and obedient to God’s commands and hopefully not arrogant or superior.

5. Offerings for Priests and Levites - 18:1-8

a) What part of the land of Israel were the Levites to receive? How were they to make their living? What was their inheritance?

The Levites received no inheritance in the land (except certain towns). They were to live on the offerings made to God by fire and the first fruits of grain, wine, oil, and wool brought by the Israelites. God was their inheritance.

b) Suppose a Levite who lived in a town far away decided to move to “the place YHWH will choose.” What could he expect? Why might this occur?

If a Levite decided to move from an outlying town to Jerusalem, then he was allowed to participate in the worship of God like his fellow Levites. Perhaps this occurred when there were more Levites than were required in a small town or perhaps he might have been called by God to go to Jerusalem.

6. Detestable Practices - 18:9-13

List the detestable practices that God specifically forbids. Are any of these practiced today? Do you think God views them differently today?

Detestable practices included child sacrifice, divination, sorcery, interpretation of omens, witchcraft, or spiritism (consulting the dead). All of these are existent today, child sacrifice being similar to abortion.

7. The Prophet - 18:14-22

a) Moses explained that God would “raise up for you a prophet like me” (verse 15). From where would this prophet come? Why did God say he was sending this prophet? What were the people to do when this prophet came?

The prophet would be raised up from among their own brothers, an Israelite. God would send him because at Mount Sinai, the people requested that God not talk directly to them lest they die (verse 16). The people were commanded to listen to him or be held accountable by God (verse 19). (See Acts 3:22-23 where Peter declares that Yeshua is this prophet.)

“YHWH your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own brothers. You must listen to him.”

Deuteronomy 18:15

b) How were the people to know whether a prophet was from God? What was to be done with a prophet who spoke in the name of other gods?

A prophet was from God if everything he prophesized came to pass. If one prophesized in the name of other gods, he was to be put to death.

8. Cities of Refuge - 19:1-14

How many cities of refuge did God command that the Israelites establish in the land of *Israel*? What was the purpose of these cities? What was the responsibility of the elders in these cities? What role did the avenger of blood play?

In this passage, God specifies that three cities be set aside as cities of refuge. (Presumably this is in addition to the 3 cities of refuge east of the Jordan spoken of in Deuteronomy 4:41-43.) These were places where those guilty of manslaughter might flee to get a fair trial. The elders of these cities must decide the innocence or guilt of the person. The avenger of blood, typically a close relative, was charged with carrying out the death penalty if the person was found guilty of murder.

Scripture Link:

In **Acts 3:22-23** the Apostle Peter declares that this prophet was *Yeshua*. See “**Digging Deeper**” at the end of this lesson.

Scripture Link:

Joshua 20 names the Cities of Refuge that were established in Israel. It also explains the purpose of these cities and how they were to carry out their duties.

9. Witnesses - 19:15-21

a) How many witnesses were required before a person could be found guilty of a crime? Do you think this makes sense?

At least two witnesses were required to find a person guilty. Otherwise, it was just a case of one person's word against another.

b) What process was followed in the case of a witness who lies in bringing a charge against another? Do you think this would help reduce false accusations?

If a malicious witness was found by the Levites and judged to be lying, then what he was seeking against another was to be done to him. This would help deter false accusations and malicious lying.

c) Moses again confirms the "law of retaliation" (an eye for an eye, ...) in verse 21. Can you see how this might help "purge the evil from among you" (verse 19)?

In the context of this passage, it seems to be speaking of malicious actions. If someone maliciously harms another person, then he should pay a penalty equal to that which he inflicted. The goal is deterrence, verse 20.

10. Going to War - 20:1-20

a) When the Israelites were preparing to go to war, who first addressed the army? What did he say?

The first to address the Israelite army was the priest who told the soldiers that God himself was going with them to fight against their enemies.

b) Who addressed the army next? What did these people say? For what reasons might a man be excused from serving? Do you think this is a good idea?

Next, the officers addressed the army inviting those who had excuses to leave. Such excuses included a new home, new vineyard, newly engaged, or just plain fearful. This helped assure that only those men who were confident and committed would serve in battle.

How do you think these rules for excusing a man from serving in the army would affect the army's performance?

c) What process was followed when the Israelite army came upon a city near the borders of the land of *Israel*? What was to be done with the people and their goods?

The Israelite army was to first make an offer of peace. If accepted, the people were to become slaves. If not, the city was besieged and when defeated the men were put to death and the women, children, and other items were taken as plunder. Note that this was only for cities on the outskirts of Israel and in “other nations.”

d) What process was followed when the Israelite army came upon cities of the nations that God had given to them as an inheritance? Why do you think the process was so different than with other cities?

In contrast, when the Israelites defeated the nations that were currently occupying the land of Israel, they were to be totally destroyed. There were at least 2 reasons for this. First, if not totally destroyed, the remnant “will teach you to follow all the detestable things they do” (verse 18). Second, these nations had been judged by God and found guilty and Israel was to be His instrument of judgment on them.

e) What was to be done with the trees that surrounded cities that were besieged?

When besieging a city, it made no sense to cut down fruit bearing trees, but others could be cut down for siege works.

11. Atonement for an Unsolved Murder - 21:1-9

Describe the process that was followed if a slain man was found in a field and no murderer could be identified. What was the purpose of this process? Contrast this with the case in which a murderer was identified. What does this imply to you about God’s standard of justice?

If a slain man was found, the elders from the nearest city took a heifer and broke its neck in the presence of priests as atonement for the murder. Other than atoning for the blood of an innocent man, the purpose was to assure that no one knew anything about the murder. God demands justice.

How do you feel about the instructions that God gave the Israelites for dealing with the people they conquered in the land that was to become Israel? Does this conflict with your understanding of God as a “Loving God?”

Scripture Link:
Numbers 35:33-34 show how God views murder in the land of Israel. Even though it may not seem necessary to us, God’s standard of justice must be met any time innocent blood is shed.

Digging deeper

The question of whether God desired Israel to have a King to rule over them can lead to other questions. For some insight into how God intended for Israelite society to function, see Leviticus 25.

1. Deuteronomy 17:14-17 speaks of a future king of Israel even before the Israelites had entered the land. Carefully read I Samuel 8-10. Do you think God desired that Israel have a king like the nations around them? What do you think God would have preferred? What insight does this give you into the character and nature of God?

It seems clear from the passage in I Samuel that God did not desire that the Israelites have a king. However, he allowed them to do so, as long as they appointed the man that He chose. From the perspective of Deuteronomy, it seems clear that God knew that in the future the Israelites would indeed occupy the land of Israel and at some point desire a king like their neighbors. It makes one wonder what kind of government God would have preferred for Israel. It also gives insight into God's character: He'll allow us the desires of our heart even though they may not be best for us.

2. Deuteronomy 18:14-22 speaks about a future prophet like Moses who God will raise up. Although this could certainly refer to all the future prophets of God, many take it to refer to the Messiah. Read John 1:21. Were the priests who were questioning John the Baptist looking for the Messiah? What similarities do you find between Yeshua and the description of the prophet given in Deuteronomy?

In the passage in John, the priests and scribes are questioning John the Baptist and ask him directly if he is the Prophet, an obvious reference to this passage. (John replies, "No.") It is interesting that the religious leaders were looking for the Messiah at this time. In the Deuteronomy passage, God instructs the people that they "must listen to him", His prophet, or God Himself will call them to account. This aligns with the fact that faith in Yeshua is the only salvation open to man. Further, the Deuteronomy passage says that the prophet will only speak God's words, which is exactly what Yeshua says several times in the Gospels, e.g., John 12:49.

For further study, see

Haftarah : Isaiah 51:12 – 53:12

Brit Hadashah : Matthew 5:38-42; 18:15-20;

Acts 3:13-26; 7:35-53; I Corinthians 5:9-13;

I Timothy 5:17-22; Hebrews 10:28-31