

This week's Torah portion is Shoftim. We are well into Deuteronomy and Moses continues to give instructions to the Israelites on what they are to do once they finally enter the Promised Land. Not surprisingly, like many torah portions, this one includes components we can embrace and others that are difficult to reconcile with today's values no matter how hard we try. The idea that any group or nation is entitled to invade and conquer another, slay the males, take their women and children hostage and confiscate their lands and possessions because, as the song says, they have "God on their side," is disturbing indeed. This notion has and continues to lead to wars and atrocities to this day.

Other aspects of the portion remain relevant in 2020 and provide lessons we can easily apply to our lives. Here are some examples: distinguishing between accidental and intentional killing of another person (what we would call manslaughter and first-degree murder);

ensuring that no one is convicted of a crime on the basis of only a single witness account, banning human sacrifice, sorcery and soothsaying.

Today, perhaps, the parts of the parsha that speak most directly and urgently to us are those relating to justice and political leadership; in fact, I am sure former president Barak Obama read this parsha and incorporated it into the speech he gave at the Democratic National Convention just this week.

The opening verses of the parsha include the following words regarding justice: “You shall appoint magistrates and officials...and they shall govern the people with due justice. You shall not judge unfairly; you shall allow no partiality; you shall not take bribes for bribes blind the eyes of the discerning and upset the just. Justice, Justice shall you pursue...”

Justice is of course the responsibility of those who govern and this parsha provides clear guidance on how Israel will choose a leader to take on this responsibility. The leader (a king, always male, in biblical

times; a president or prime minister today) must not demonstrate greed or use his position to amass great personal wealth; he may not act haughtily toward others and most importantly, he is to have “a copy of this teaching, our Torah” near him at all times. He must study it so he is familiar with and understands the laws and he must comply with those laws for he is not above them or exempt from them.

The relevance to us today is obvious. Perhaps we should suggest that instead of inappropriately and insincerely holding a bible aloft, the most powerful leaders in the democratic world should read it, study it, understand it, govern justly as it prescribes and acknowledge that they are not above its laws.

One aspect of good leadership mentioned earlier in the torah is the importance of appointing and following the advice of wise advisers, we often call them experts. This enables a leader to distinguish truth from fake news so that the leader can govern based on accurate information and transmit the facts to those he governs. Failure to do this, just as

failure to govern justly is irresponsible and a blatant failure of leadership.

I receive many emails from the URJ (Union for Reform Judaism) each week and last week one of them came from Lee Kass called “The day the music died: Jewish lessons from a previous plague.” It caught my attention as we are struggling to prepare for the High Holidays given the importance of music and the admonitions against singing due to our current plague, COVID19. Kass was specifically referring to a musical company in Venice during the bubonic and pneumonic plagues of 1630. People then fought the disease in many of the same ways we are fighting Covid today: closing towns to visitors, closing public places, isolating people in their homes and preventing people from touching one another; they even dropped their coins into vinegar, an acid that would have had some disinfecting properties.

But they did not have the benefits of modern science and attributed the plague to demons, witchcraft and punishment for sins. They killed

dogs and cats thinking they were responsible which allowed the rats and their fleas to multiply and spread the disease. We have enough scientific information now not to blame demons and witchcraft and not to use miracle cures like the charms and herbs of the 17th century. Still we see a failure of leadership, ignoring the best medical information; advising people to use today's unproven miracle cures rather than following the advice of the experts. In addition, just as in the 17th century, we still hear leaders creating scapegoats and blaming ethnic groups including the Jews for the disease. These actions promote the spread of disease and have led to a further erosion of justice, leaving those already disadvantaged more vulnerable to stigma, disease, poverty and misuse of the law. These leaders have not read the Torah and they are not governing justly.

And for all of us enduring our current plague, there is the spectre of High Holidays without music.

This will not happen. Just as the musicians of Venice continued in a new, more limited way for years after the plague, we will be surrounded by beautiful music these High Holidays. Please enjoy the music we are sharing with you throughout Elul to prepare us for the Days of Awe. And when the High Holidays arrive this year, our services will be filled with fantastic music; it won't be quite the same as before the plague, but it will be wonderful.

Kain yehi ratzon.