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Dvar Torah for Parshat Eikev

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Outside the Lion's Den: Justice You Shall Pursue

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Justice, justice you shall pursue
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Justice, justice you
Justice, justice
Justice

Parshat Shoftim is a shouting demand for the imperative of justice. We are ordered not to pervert justice (Deut 16.18), not to do evil (17.2), to follow the law (17.11) and to pursue peace (20.10). We are also instructed into the practical

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considerations which justice demands, such as waging just war and responding justly to murder.

Not an archaic trope but rather a cry across bounds of time and space, reading Shoftim in 2016 evokes an evaluation of our own public square, bursting with demands for justice. In our moral vocabulary, justice has become a vehicle hitched to an adjective: racial justice and reproductive justice, academic justice and environmental justice, distributive justice and restorative justice. Public, political discourse debates not what justice demands, but instead what applied justice might mean. Shoftim resurrects the first-order question of what justice itself might be.

I find the first-order question perplexing, but I must confess my struggle with the second-order question. For example, is it noble for me to pursue graduate studies when I could work for broader social aims? If my discretionary income could reduce suffering in the world, how can I justify non-essential costs? Above all, what might justice itself demand for how I live?

In an [excerpt](#) from Jonathan Safran Foer's new novel, *Here I Am*, two teenage cousins named Tamir and Jacob dare each other to climb into the lion's den in the National Zoo:

But then he heard it, and was brought back. He looked up, met Tamir's eyes, and could see that Tamir heard it, too. A stirring. Flattening foliage.

Jacob turned and saw an animal. Not in his mind but an actual animal in the actual world. An animal that didn't deliberate and expound. An uncircumcised animal. It was fifty feet away, but its hot breath was steaming up Jacob's glasses.

Moments like these—those few seconds in life when we are thrust into the lion's den, unexpectedly staring down the stirring beast—ask us to think through how we choose to live. Safran Foer imagines a bigger life, a life where normalcy is peppered by breath-stopping risk. Time stops when you leap into the lion's den. One feels, in the author's formulation, “that you could be in love with life itself.”

If reckless, romantic risk offers one way of making life bigger,

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Parshat Shoftim presents an additional path, the path of acting justly. We are commanded to rise above our own lives and interests, and to act in accordance with a broader framework for goodness. I wrestle with this Parsha because while its call for justice is clear, the text leaves its reader to think through the second-order of what applied justice might entail, a question of immense importance. Perhaps we might live a bigger life by practicing justice alongside others, by striving toward the right, that “truth more first than sun more last than star” (e.e. cummings).

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