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Judges

16:18 to 17:13

Judges DIG: Why the appointment of judges and officers? What were their five mandates? Why was their character so important? What does the word officers mean? What kind of sacrifices are you offering up to Ha'Shem? What qualifies a person for leadership in a local Messianic congregation or church? Why did the Jews keep turning back to idolatry? What was the lure? Why would false worship lead to potential death? What safeguards against false accusations are given here? What is the role of these courts of law?

REFLECT: What qualifies a person for local Messianic congregation or church leadership? What role does this text suggest believers should play in each other's lives when one "breaks covenant" with God? In what ways do we bear false witness against each other? What guidelines for justice from these verses are still at work today in the governing bodies of church and state? How should believers respond to another's contempt for the law?

Parashah 48: Shof'tim (Judges) 16:18-21:9
(To see link click [Af](#) - Parashah)

The Key Person: Moshe, speaking to all Isra'el.

The Scene: In the wilderness east of the Promised Land, ready to cross over the Jordan.

The Main Events: include more of Moses' words about appointing judges for a just society, selecting a king, Levites' inheritance, warning against pagan practices, weighing a prophet's words, cities of refuge, two witnesses needed, rules of warfare, and redeeming bloodshed.³⁷⁷ In this parashah we see Messiah as our righteous Judge, Priest, Prophet and King, who is also our perfect Sacrifice.

Moses pointed out the basic offices and obligations of the government that ADONAI wanted Isra'el to establish in the Promised Land.

On the basis of this instruction of **ADONAI**, the synagogue was established, the court system (the Sanhedrin) was established, the whole rabbinical system was developed during the inter-testimonial period when **Isra'el** was in Babylon (see the commentary on [Jeremiah](#), to see link click [Gu](#) - [Seventy Years of Imperial Babylonian Rule](#)). When the **Israelites** returned from the Exile under **Zerubbabel**, **Ezra**, and **Nehemiah**, the **Temple** was in total disarray and disrepair. But once the scroll of **Deuteronomy** was discovered, the mitzvot written here were taken seriously (see [Bm](#) - [Ezra Reads the Scroll of Deuteronomy](#)) .

Appointment of Judges and Officials: **Moshe** commanded the **Israelites** to enforce **God's mitzvot** in every **Jewish city** of the **Promised Land**. **Judges** and **officials** were to be appointed in every **city** to decide cases of civil domestic, and even religious controversies. These **judges** were to act with justice and righteousness and were to be entirely impartial in **their** findings. Moreover, **the judges** were vested with executive powers of state, so that **they** directed the enforcement of judicial matters (by means of the *shoterim*, the police of ancient **Isra'el**). The idea of **judges** derived from **Jethro's** advice to appoint a hierarchy of **God-fearing men** over **the people** just after **the Exodus** from **Egypt** (see the commentary on [Exodus Cy](#) - [Moses Chose Capable Men from All Isra'el](#)).

In practical terms, this meant that every town in **Isra'el** was to have its own "house of judgment," with its own police force. In smaller towns, a court was to have no less than **3 judges** to render binding decisions; in larger towns **23 judges** were required. Later in Jerusalem, **the Sanhedrin** (see the commentary on [The Life of Christ Lg](#) - [The Great Sanhedrin](#)), a group of **70 judges** and the high priest formed the Supreme Court of the nation. The idea of **the Sanhedrin** goes back to the **70 elders** who are **the covenant meal** with **Moshe** at **Mount Sinai** (see the commentary on [Exodus En](#) - [The Covenant Meal With the God of Isra'el](#)).



All your gates (16:18): Judges and officers you are to appoint within all your gates that ADONAI your God is giving you, according to your tribes; and they are to judge the people with righteous judgment (16:18). As the city gate was a popular place to meet (see the commentary on [Ruth Ba - Bo'az Obtains the Right of Redemption](#)), it became a convenient place for the administration of justice. There courts were held, and disputes were settled. The fact that princes and judges thus sat at the gate in the discharge of their official duties, the word gate becomes a synonym for power or authority.³⁷⁸ The word translated officers means *writers* or *secretaries* and refers to the men who kept the official records and genealogies, advised the judges, and carried out their decisions. God was the supreme Legislator in the Land, because He gave the mitzvot; the local judges formed the judicial branch of the government; and their efforts constituted the executive branch.³⁷⁹

Moshe gave these judges and officers five mandates (16:19-20):

- 1. Israelite judges** must render their decisions in accordance with God's standards of justice, or the words of the righteous, literally *judge a righteous judgment* (16:19d). Probably these men were the chief elders in each tribe. Therefore, the judges appointed in each city were probably taken from that city's council of elders (Deuteronomy 19:12).³⁸⁰
- 2. They were not to twist justice (16:19a), or, deprive a person of justice before the face of Elyon (Lamentations 3:35).** This expression occurs in relation to partiality (Proverbs 18:5), and bribery (First Samuel 8:3; Proverbs 17:23), and normally affects the poor, the alien, and the fatherless (Exodus 23:6; Deuteronomy 24:17 and 27:19).
- 3. They were not to show partiality (16:19b).** Just as Moshe did with the judges he appointed soon after Sinai, so here he encourages these judges not to show favor (literally,

recognize the face of) based on a person's statue or wealth (**Deuteronomy 1:17; Job 34:19; Proverbs 24:23 and 28:21**) because it is hostile to genuine **justice**.

4. Moses demanded that those **judges** refuse to **take a bribe, for a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and distorts the words of the righteous (16:19c)**. In other words, it chokes justice rather than achieving it! **Taking a bribe** violates **Isra'el's** function as a banner nation given the responsibility of representing **God's** character among the goyim (**Exodus 19:4-6**).³⁸¹

5. Finally, the sole purpose of those **judges** was the pursuit of **justice** above all else: **Justice you must pursue, so that you may live and possess the land that ADONAI your God is giving you (16:20)**. Prosperous life could not continue in **the Land** if **they** abandoned **YHVH**. But likewise, it could not continue if judicial corruption set in like a cancer in **their** society.³⁸² **Pirkei Avot, or Ethics of the Fathers, is a tractate of the Mishna that deals with morality, virtues, and righteousness. It teaches us many important rules, two of which are, "Do not judge your fellow until you come to his place" (Pirkei Avot 2:4), and "... judge every person as admirable, or good" (Pirkei Avot 1:6).**

The decisions of judges affected not only the individuals on trial but on the entire nation. If **the judges** freed the guilty at the expense of the innocent, **the Land** would be **defiled** and **Ha'Shem** would eventually remove the nation from **the Land**. Unfortunately, that's exactly what happened during the years after the fall of **Isra'el** to the Assyrians in 722 BC, and **Judah** to the Babylonians on Tisha B'Av in 586 BC (see the commentary on **Jeremiah Ga - The Fall of Jerusalem**). The courts became corrupt and allowed the rich to rob the poor and the needy, while the wealthy soon owned great estates and controlled the economy. Because the leaders didn't obey the mitzvot about the Year of Release and the Year of Jubilee, the economy got out of balance and the land was stolen from its rightful owners. **YHVH** wouldn't permit such flagrant disobedience to this Torah, so **He** punished **the people** severely by sending **them** into captivity (see the commentary on **Jeremiah Gu - Seventy Years of Imperial Babylonian Rule**).

Leadership in the local Messianic congregation or church must only be given to those who are qualified (**Acts 6:1-7; Titus 1:5-9**). Everything rises or falls on leadership. How tragic it is when Messianic congregations or churches choose unqualified and untried people to "fill" offices instead of using those offices for the buildup up of the congregation and the glory of **God (First Timothy 3:10)**. In the leadership of the local congregation, spiritual character is far more important than a person's popularity, personality, talent, or

occupation.³⁸³

Devotion to ADONAI:

Worship ADONAI only (16:21-22): The first responsibility of **the judges** was to prevent impure worship practices in **the Land**. **The Israelites** had already been commanded to **cut down their Asherah poles** and **smash their pillars (7:5)**. Now **they** were explicitly forbidden **to plant for yourself an Asherah pole of any kind of wood beside the altar of ADONAI your God that you make for yourself**. Idol temples and altars were surrounded by thick groves and trees, which became the place of idolatrous worship. For this reason, **God** forbid the planting of trees near **His altar**, lest **His people** become, or seem to be, like the pagans.³⁸⁴ **Nor are you to set up a pillar for yourself - ADONAI your God hates this (16:22-22)**. These two claims deal primarily with YHVH's claim on Isra'el's exclusive loyalty (see [Bl](#) - **Have No Other Gods**).

Unclean animals (17:1): Just as setting up an **Asherah pole** or a **pillar beside the altar of ADONAI** defiled **God's** sanctuary, the offering of **defective sacrifices** was also an **abomination to Him**. No animal with any kind of serious defect or flaw was fit for use in the worship of ADONAI. **You are not to sacrifice to ADONAI your God a bull or a sheep that has a defect or anything bad - for that would be an abomination to ADONAI your God (17:1)**. As **Malachi** pointed out later, to offer a defective and less-than-best **sacrifice** would be **detestable to Ha'Shem (Malachi 1:6-8)**. The act would undermine the very purpose of **the sacrifice**, for it would further widen the rift between the worshiper and **the LORD**, which **the sacrifice** was designed to bridge.³⁸⁵

Crime against the covenant (17:2-7): **Moses** describes a hypothetical situation in which an **Israelite** man or woman is caught worshipping **other gods** or celestial bodies. **Suppose there is found in your midst - within one of your gates that ADONAI your God is giving you - a man or woman who does what is evil in the eyes of ADONAI your God by transgressing His covenant. This person goes and serves other gods and worships them - the sun or moon or any of the heavenly hosts, which I have not commanded** (see the commentary on [Genesis Lw](#) - **The Witness of the Stars**). Upon hearing this, **the judges** in the vicinity must conduct a thorough examination to determine the accuracy of the charge. **It is told to you and you have heard about it, and you investigate thoroughly and indeed it is true and the thing certain - this abomination has been done in Isra'el. Then you are to bring out to your gates that man or woman who has done this evil thing, and stone that man or woman with stones to death (17:2-5)**.

There needed to be at least **two witnesses** for the charge to be proved true. **By the word of two or three witnesses, (Second Corinthians 13:1; Hebrews 10:28) the one who is to die is to be put to death. No one is to be put to death by the word of one witness. The hand of the witnesses is to be first to put him to death (17:6-7a). They were the ones to throw the first stone** (see the commentary on [The Life of Christ Gg - The Woman Caught in the Act of Adultery](#)). **The witnesses, by throwing the first stone,** accepted the burden of responsibility; in the event of further evidence establishing the innocence of the (now deceased) accused, and thereby the false testimony of **the witnesses, they** would then assume the responsibility for wrongful execution, in effect murder.³⁸⁶

And afterward the hand of all the people. The participation of the entire community emphasizes the far-reaching impact of the offense and the response. **So, you are to purge the evil from your midst (17:7b).** There is a phrase that we hear many times in the study of **the Torah**. One that is repeated seven times from **Chapters 13 to 24, “You will purge the evil from your midst” (13:6, 17:7, 19:19, 21:21, 22:21, 22:24, 24:7).**

The higher court (17:8-13): **Moses** made a provision for future **judges** in the Promised Land similar to the provided **judges** in the time of the wilderness wanderings (**1:17**). **Suppose a matter arises that is too hard for you to judge.** Three examples are given: **over bloodshed, legal claims or assault - matters of controversy within your gates.** The higher court was to be established in **the place ADONAI your God chooses** (the Tabernacle, or future Temple); thus, giving it the sacredness and authority of the presence and name of **YHVH**. **Then you should come to the Levitical cohanim and the judge in charge at that time. And you will inquire, and they will tell you the sentence of judgment (17:8-9).** It is likely that referred cases were dealt with in the higher court by both priests and judges; the particular function of **the priests** would be to legislate on matters of ceremonial mitzvot, and **the judge** would rule on matters of civil or criminal mitzvot.³⁸⁷

It is interesting that around 870-850 BC, King **Jehoshaphat** set up a higher court like this one. Part of **his** program of reform was that **he** personally traveled throughout **Judah** to encourage **the people** to turn back to **ADONAI**. **He** also appointed godly **judges** throughout **the Land**, arbiters whose task it was to judge without **favoritism or bribery**. **He** did the same in **Jerusalem** with a higher court charged with hearing matters referred to it throughout **Judah**. Over this higher court **he** selected **Amariah the chief priest**, judging in all matters pertaining to **ADONAI**, and **Zebadiah, the ruler of the House of Judah**, judging in all the matters pertaining to the king. Also, the Levites would serve as

officials to implement the rulings of those two men **(Second Chronicles 19:11)**.³⁸⁸

You are to act according to the sentence they tell you from that place ADONAI chooses, and take care to do all that they instruct you. The decisions of the higher court would be final (see **the Great Sanhedrin** above). **You are to act according to the instruction they teach you and the judgment they tell you - you must not turn aside from the sentence they tell you, to the right or to the left.** Any rebellion against the higher court was considered a capital offense. **The man who acts presumptuously by not listening to the cohen who stands to serve there before ADONAI your God, or to the judge, that man must die. So, you are to purge the evil from Isra'el.** This made the rule of **justice** supreme in **the Land** and helped prevent anarchy. **Then all the people will hear and be afraid, and not act presumptuously again (17:10-13).**