



5 words

that go with justice

For the Jewish sages, the double use of *tzedek* ('justice') invited creative interpretation such as linking justice to a second category (e.g., justice & truth). If you were to pair justice with another quality or virtue what would it be? Explain your choice and why how you view its importance.

1. Justice & relationship.

"If any of your kin fall into difficulty and become dependent upon you, you shall support them... Do not take interest in advance or otherwise make a profit from them, but fear your God; let them live with you" (Lev. 25:35-36).

"One person's word is no one's word; we should quietly hear both sides" (Johann Wolfgang von Goethe).

2. Justice & responsibility.

"For the sin we have committed in Your sight by casting off responsibility..." (a prayer of repentance from the morning service for *Yom Kippur*)

3. Justice & zeal.

"The Prophets take us to the slums. Their breathless impatience with injustice may strike us as hysterical..." (Abraham Joshua Heschel).

4. Justice & action.

"Justice is truth in action" (Benjamin Disraeli).

"The greatest menace to freedom is an inert people" (Louis Brandeis).

5. Justice & praise of God.

"But the Lord of hosts is exalted by justice" (Isaiah 5:16).

Light of Torah

Ancient texts, through fresh eyes, alive for today.

Why reflect on Torah?

The Church must never forget that "it draws nourishment from that good olive tree onto which the wild olive branches of the Gentiles have been grafted."

- Nostra Aetate, 4 (1965)

With this statement, based on Romans 11:17-24, the Second Vatican Council inaugurated a new era of Christian-Jewish relations. After centuries of tragic division, we are now in a position to recognize and affirm the profoundly graced relationship between the two peoples of faith.

Christianity grew out of Judaism. Jesus himself was a devout Jew, as was Mary, the apostles and most of the early Church. As the Church continues to grow and mature, it requires an ever-deeper appreciation of its Jewish origins.

The Church's roots in Judaism include the Hebrew Scriptures ('Old Testament'). Even today, Christians can tend to overlook these sacred texts, viewing them as less important than the Gospels. In fact, the Gospels depend on them as their very foundation. As Christians we can be nourished by Jewish interpretative traditions as we explore our bible.



Deuteronomy 16:18—21:9

Shofetim: 'judges'



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Torah Portion

From the Jewish calendar of Torah readings:

Deuteronomy 16:18—21:9

Today's Torah portion begins with the summons, "You shall appoint judges and officials throughout your tribes... and they shall render just decisions for the people" (16:18). The judicial figures appointed here are not priests but lay people, apparently selected from existing chiefs, officials and military personnel.

Bibliography: Bradley Artson, *Parashah Shoftim commentary*, 5769, American Jewish University, <http://judaism.ajula.edu>; Eskenazi & Weiss, *The Torah: A Women's Commentary* (NY, 2008); Friedman, *Commentary on the Torah* (San Francisco, 2008); *Midrash Rabbah, Vol. 7* (London/NY: Soncino Press, 1983).

Tasting Torah

Justice, justice you shall pursue... (Deut.16:20, Friedman).

Justice, and only justice, you shall pursue... (Deut.16:20, NRSV).

This verse, with its repetition of the Hebrew word for justice, *tzedek*, has attracted the sages' attention over centuries of Torah study. In the oral transmission of texts repetition was a common way to indicate emphasis. It also opened the door for further interpretation. What kind of commentary do we find emerging from the sages?

Touching Torah

For Rashi, the repetition of the Hebrew word for 'justice' suggests that one should 'seek reliable civil courts.' Other commentators take it to mean that justice should be pursued only through just means. Still others say that justice should be sought for both plaintiff and defendant.

Targum Onkelos (an Aramaic translation of the Hebrew bible) interprets the repeated word as a call for honesty and integrity. "It is better to choke, than to utter a lie," goes one rabbinic saying, indicating how highly esteemed is truthfulness in rabbinic thought. Thus the first characteristic of a good judge is honesty, and the most basic way to pursue justice is to pursue truth.

And you? How might you creatively interpret the double use of *tzedek*, 'justice'? Discuss with a friend in havrutah.

Depthing Torah

Justice and righteousness are central religious and ethical categories in Judaism. One cannot claim to love God without being concerned for justice. In the midrash (*Devarim Rabbah*) we find the comment that God prefers justice to ritual sacrifice. It notes that Scripture does not say that God loves justice *as much* as sacrifice, but rather *more* than sacrifice (Proverbs 21:3). It then elaborates on this with further reasons for the superiority of justice over sacrifice. Briefly:

1. Sacrifice was only useful while the Temple stood, but after its destruction sacrifice ceased while just acts continued.
2. Sacrifices are performed by humanity, but even God practices justice.
3. Sacrifices have merit in this world, but justice is essential to the world to come.

Justice, of course, is also a central teaching in Christianity. By reflecting on it from the standpoint of Judaism we can better understand how Jesus was formed in his Jewish identity, and how deeply justice and righteousness were embedded in his person and teachings.

Doing Torah

Justice relates to how we treat the 'poor' and the 'weakest' in our midst; the 'widow' and 'orphan,' to use the language of Torah.

What does justice 'look' like in a family/ household setting, in a parish setting, in the neighborhood or workplace?



From the midrash

The appointment of judges can be compared to a king who had a favorite son and a precious garden. The king entrusted his precious garden to his beloved son. So too did God who loved nothing more than justice, entrust justice to God's beloved child Israel, saying: 'My children, by your life, as a result of respecting justice, I am exalted.'

(see Deut.R. 5.7)

Church congregations often find themselves divided into 'camps.' One camp promotes social justice causes, another camp promotes 'community,' and another focuses on prayer or liturgy... With the help of the midrash above, reflect on the intricate links between justice, relationships, and worship.