

Judges and officers shall you appoint... and they shall judge the people with righteous judgment... righteous, righteous shall you pursue. (16:18,20)

We are enjoined to establish a justice system in which righteousness is the criterion by which justice is determined and by which reward and punishment is to be meted out. While justice is a concept ingrained in all humanity, the Jewish religion places a premium on justice and considers it the foundation of our existence. Hashem is the Ultimate Judge, the Arbiter who determines what is right and what is wrong. A society that adheres to rewarding good and punishing bad is a just society. A society which disregards good and bad is corrupt. Justice is the lodestar by which we navigate life in our society. Thus, one who acts unjustly does not belong in our circle.

In his commentary to (16:20), *L'maan tichyeh v'yarashta es ha'aretz*; "So that you will live and take possession of the Land," *Rashi* writes: "The merit of appointing judges keeps *Am Yisrael* alive and allows them to settle upon the Land." *Horav Yeruchem Levovitz, zl*, writes (concerning the above *Rashi*), "So great does the Torah consider the concept of *mishpat*, justice, that merely the appointment of Judges, even without enacting a system, is sufficient reason to keep *Klal Yisrael* alive. All the Heavenly promises we merit to receive are due to our adherence to even the simplest laws, such as monetary disputes."

The *Mashgiach* teaches us that the justice system is not to be followed merely in order for society to determine how it should live, what to do and what not. The concept extends far beyond that. It is the reason that we are alive. Without justice as our guide, we are not worthy of life! The perversion of justice in the most minute manner -- when absolute truth is not our guide -- is the beginning of the destruction of the individual and the society which permits it.

Our *gedolei Yisrael*, Torah giants, personified the Torah's view of *mishpat*. To take something from another person, regardless of the circumstance, even with the knowledge that the owner would be honored to give permission for its use, is considered tantamount to theft. It is not absolute truth. If the individual were to be asked, "Do you have express permission to use it?" and the answer would be, "No," even though the person would certainly have given permission, the act constitutes theft. *Horav Moshe Chevronei (Rosh Yeshivah, Chevron)* once sat in his seat on the *Mizrach vont*, eastern wall (the prestigious place reserved for the *Roshei Yeshivah* and distinguished guests), during *Mussaf* on *Shabbos* without a *tallis*. He *davened Mussaf* not wearing a *tallis*. Apparently, he had to leave *davening* for a few moments and had removed his *tallis*. When he returned, he discovered someone had taken his *tallis* by mistake. *Halachically*, he was permitted to use the other man's *tallis*. A dispensation allows one to use another fellow's *tallis* for a short while. The *Rosh Yeshivah* refused to rely on the dispensation. If it was not his *tallis*, he would not use it. Instead, he would sit in front of the entire *yeshivah* and *daven* without a *tallis*.

When *Horav Eliyahu Eliezer Dessler, zl*, arrived in *Eretz Yisrael* to serve as *Mashgiach* in

Ponovezh, a group of students from Gateshead, England (where he had founded and built the *yeshivah*), joined him. When they wanted to speak with their *Rebbe* in learning, he demurred. He said, "I have been hired to serve as *Mashgiach*, to be the ethical supervisor of the student body. As such, I am supposed to devote all of my thoughts and abilities to this task. To take time off to speak in learning on another subject is akin to stealing."

Last, when *Rav Yechezkel Levenstein, zl*, the *Mashgiach* in Ponovezh, reached the age of seventy-five, he asked the *Ponovezher Rav, zl*, to relieve him of his duties. He felt that, due to his age, he was unable to devote enough of himself physically to the students.

The *Rosh Yeshivah* replied, "*Rav Chatzkel*, I am prepared to pay your salary just to have you *daven* and learn in the *bais hamedrash*. The *bachurim*, students, benefit just from looking at you!"