

THE DAY OF JUSTICE

In my *Erev Rosh Ha-Shanah* sermon I mentioned that the Jewish New Year has many names. Yesterday evening, as we paused in the twilight, my focus was on the New Year as *harat olam*, the 'birthday of the world'. This morning, I invite us to think about this day by considering another of its names: *Yom Ha-Din*, 'The Day of Judgement'. This name reminds us that the first day of *Tishri*, the seventh month of the cycle of months that begins with *Nisan* in the spring, is also the first day of *aseret y'mei t'shuvah*, the 'ten days of returning' that conclude on *Yom Kippur*, the tenth day of *Tishri*. Today we begin a process of self-reflection and self-examination, in which we look back at our actions and inactions of the past year, everything we did and failed to do, the errors and wrongs we committed, the hurts we inflicted on others; all of this in the knowledge that we face a judgement. Perhaps, we don't acknowledge a Divine Judge, who is weighing our deeds and misdeeds in the balance during these ten days, which are also known as *yamim nora'im*, literally, 'awed days'. But even if the notion of Divine Judgement feels alien or meaningless, we know that our actions have consequences on others, as well as on ourselves, and that judgement lies in these consequences; we can weigh our own deeds on the scale, and reach our own conclusions.

I've translated *Yom Ha-Din* as 'The Day of Judgement', which is the usual translation. But Hebrew, unlike English, which has a huge vocabulary, and so uses individual words very precisely, Hebrew has a more concise vocabulary, and so words can have a range of meaning. Yes, *Rosh Ha-Shanah* is *Yom Ha-Din*, in the sense of being 'The Day of Judgement'. But it is also *Yom Ha-Din*, in the sense of being 'The Day of Justice'.

So, what are the implications of thinking of *Rosh Ha-Shanah* as 'The Day of Justice'? Before we can answer this question, we need to examine the word, *din*, in the sense of its meaning as 'justice'. In the first chapter of *Pirkei Avot*, the 'Chapters of the Sages', which is appended to the Mishnah, the first code of rabbinic law, edited around the year 200, we find this statement (1:18):

Rabban Simeon ben Gamliel used to say: 'The world stands on three things [*d'varim*]: on justice [*al ha-din*]; and on truth [*v'al ha-emet*]; and on peace [*v'al ha-shalom*]'.

Having said that Hebrew is more concise than English, there are four words for 'justice' in the Bible and rabbinic literature. The passage speaks of '*din*'. In biblical Hebrew *din* means 'judgement', but the early rabbis extended this meaning of the word by using it to denote 'law', a 'law-suit' and a 'claim', as well as 'justice'. *Din* conveys 'justice' in the sense of the legal system for executing justice. A rabbinic court is a *Beit Din*, 'House of Judgement', and several tractates of the Mishnah and the Talmud are devoted to different aspects of the rabbinic legal system.¹ In the *Torah*, another word connotes the system of justice, *mishpat*, based on the three consonants, *Shin Pei Tet*, meaning to judge. The 'judges' of the Bible were the *shof'tim*.²

The *Torah* also uses two other related words for justice, *tzedek* and *tz'dakah*, which are both based on the three-letter root: *Tzadi Dalet Kuf*. We read in Deuteronomy 16:20, in the context of a passage dealing with how the system of justice is to be administered: *Tzedek, tzedek, tirdof*, 'Justice, justice, you shall pursue'. In Hebrew, nouns, adjectives, and verbs are all derived from

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three-letter roots, that is, each word is rooted in three consonants. The word 'pursue' in Hebrew, indicated by the three consonants, *Reish Dalet Pei*, conveys a sense of urgency, as it does in English. In Hebrew syntax, it is usual for the verb to come first, and in the verse, *Tzedek, tzedek, tirdof*, 'Justice, justice, you shall pursue', the tone of urgency is heightened, not only by the repetition of the word, *tzedek*, 'justice', but also by the word order: 'Justice, justice, you shall pursue'. Meanwhile, the repetition of 'justice' suggests impartiality, where two parties are involved, pursuing justice for the one also necessitates pursuing justice for the other.

Justice also has an economic component. In another chapter in Deuteronomy, in a section dealing with economic justice, we read that, when giving a loan to someone, returning their garment that has been taken as a pledge before sunset is an act of *tz'dakah*, 'justice' (24:13). The pursuit of justice, *tzedek*, involves what we now call 'redistributive justice'. Similarly, *tz'dakah*, connotes an act of justice that we are *obligated* to perform in favour of the poor and the needy. Although *tz'dakah* is often translated as 'charity', the word charity has a very different meaning. From the Latin word *caritas*, charity suggests an act of kindness that expresses our loving feelings towards others. The point about *tz'dakah* is that we are obligated to do it, even when we do not *feel* charitable.

While the words *tzedek* and *tz'dakah* relate to the individual's responsibility to act justly, the words *din* and *mishpat* focus on the legal system. The legal system is governed by rules that regulate the conduct of individuals and treat parties to the dispute on the basis of impartiality. As we read in Deuteronomy 16:19:

You shall not pervert justice [*mishpat*]; you shall not show partiality; neither shall you take a bribe; for a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and subverts the words of the righteous [*tzadikim*].

The legal system also attempts to ensure that the stronger members of the society come to the aid of the more vulnerable and dependent members of the society, designated in the *Torah*, in particular, as 'the sojourner [*ha-geir*], the orphan [*ha-yatom*] – literally, the "fatherless" – and the widow [*ha-almanah*]' (Deut. 24:17) (in that order). The sojourner is dependent on the generosity of the host society. In the case of the fatherless and the widow, having lost the male breadwinner in the family, they both become dependent on the wider community.

Having examined the different words for and applications of 'justice' in Jewish teaching, let me return to the question I posed a few minutes ago: what are the implications of thinking of *Rosh Ha-Shanah* as 'The Day of Justice'? During the *Rosh Ha-Shanah* and *Yom Kippur* services, we recite a mediaeval poem, known by its opening words, *u'n'tanneh tokef*. In this poem which addresses God as a *Dayyan*, a 'Judge', we proclaim in response that we can avert the negative judgement of the Divine Judge by engaging in three related actions: *t'shuvah*, *t'fillah*, and *tz'dakah*; by 'returning' to the true path of our lives; through 'prayer', which in the essential meaning of *t'fillah*, implies self-interrogation, and through acts of 'justice'. We can see these three actions as

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a process that involves the decision to change our ways, the self-examination that enables us to do this, and the acts of justice that put intention into practice.

So, today is the Day of Judgement which call us, starting from now, to practice Justice every day of our lives. How do we go about doing this? We will all have different responses to this question. For those who are concerned about tackling all forms of injustice, social, economic, and political, in our communities, society, and throughout the world, there are multiple demands on our commitment to justice. But whatever we decide to do and wherever we direct our energies, I think it's important that we take guidance from a core feature of justice in both its legal and activist dimensions, and that is equity. Again and again, I return to the key *Torah* verse that I quoted earlier: '*Tzedek, Tzedek tirdof*', 'Justice, Justice, you shall pursue' (Deut. 16:20). If our passionate pursuit of justice rests on a binary approach in which, we see only heroes and villains, in which we feel justice can only be served if the 'good' side we support defeats the 'evil' side we deplore, then the outcome is likely to fuel conflict, rather than establish justice.

As I say this, of course, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is at the forefront of my mind. With its roots in the unilateral establishment of the State of Israel in May 1948, and then firmly entrenched following Israel's victory in the Six Day War of June 1967 and the subsequent occupation of the West Bank and Gaza, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has become even more catastrophic for both peoples since the horrific Hamas-led attacks in southern Israel in October 7, 2023, and Israel's war against Hamas in Gaza, with its devastating consequences for the people of Gaza. Justice demands that the dispossessed and displaced Palestinian people achieve liberation and self-determination. In order for the conditions to be created to make this outcome possible, justice also demands that both peoples can live alongside one another in peace and security.

With social media dominated by binary narratives, I have drawn strength and inspiration from those projects and organisations in which Israelis and Palestinians are working together to secure a just peace. This morning, I want to share an example of an organisation, '*Roots-Judar-Shorashim*', founded in 2014, a 'bi-national initiative' for Palestinians and Israelis living in the West Bank, which engages in educational and dialogue activities, with a view to building trust between the two peoples.³ Given the daily horrors inflicted by extremist settlers against West Bank Palestinian communities, Roots provides the most powerful evidence I've come across that when protagonists begin to acknowledge each other's narratives, it is possible to break the cycle of hatred and violence.

I've attended a number of Roots online zoom events. The one I joined in February, took the form of an interview. The interviewer was Rabbi Daniel Rowe, who immigrated to Israel from England just two years ago, and has since that time been making contacts with Palestinians. As Rabbi Rowe put it before he began the interview, 'If you only have one side of a story, you haven't got half the story, you've got fiction'. His interviewee was Ali Abu Awwad, who was born in 1948 to a refugee family, and whose mother was one of the leaders of the PLO. Like his mother, Ali spent

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several years in prison, during which time he said that he learned about nonviolent resistance. Released four years after the Oslo peace initiative, during the second *intifada*, Ali's brother was killed by an Israel soldier. 'By that time', he said, he 'had enough anger to take revenge'. But one day, he met a group of Israelis who asked permission to visit him at his home. As Ali talked with them, he began to realise that 'the price I paid was also being paid by Israelis'. He also saw himself as 'equal to Israelis for the first time'. That experience changed Ali, making everything, as he put it, 'more complex'. Since then, Ali feels that 'I carry Israelis in my heart and on my shoulders, as well as my own pain'.

As he spoke, Ali Abu Awaad shared his vision of a different future in which 'from the river to the sea, everyone will be free'; a vision rooted in his continuing conversations with Israelis. Ali argued that both sides have to 'learn to change behaviour, rather than change identity'. That 'no solution is possible if we don't respect that both sides belong to this land'. He argued that on each side, 'leaders have failed', commenting that, 'politicians manage a situation, leaders manage the journey to a different future'. Ali also stressed that 'dialogue isn't a solution, it's a tool', and that together they need to find 'a solution that recognises the dignity and identity of both peoples'. Ali went on: 'We need to find a political solution that allows these identities to thrive in their own countries and to thrive together', and 'we have to understand what conditions have to be created on the ground for there to be a solution'. In his concluding remarks, Ali Abu Awaad said, 'we peacemakers are the *active minority* who speak for the *silent majority*'.

Of course, Ali Abu Awaad and Rabbi Daniel Rowe are just two individuals; two voices of sanity. The social media echo-chamber cacophony that now dominates the public discourse shrieks hatred and drowns out such voices. Nevertheless, they are two individuals, who are participating in an Israeli-Palestinian coexistence initiative, that is among one hundred and eighty such projects and organisations.⁴ Today, on this 'Day of Justice', when we are called to act for justice, let us demonstrate our commitment to justice by, at the very least, amplifying the voices of the peace- and- justice makers in Israel-Palestine, and in every place. And let us say: Amen.

Rabbi Elli Tikvah Sarah
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¹ The legal tractates of the Mishnah (and Talmud) are: *Bava Kamma*, *Bava Metzia*, and *Bava Batra* (the three 'gates'), *Sanhedrin*, *Makkot*, *Shevuot*, *Eiduyyot*, *Avodah Zarah*, and *Horayot* – all in *Nezikin*, ('Damages'), the Fourth Order of the Mishnah, which deals with the laws of private and civil wrongs, capital penalties, homicide, courts of justice, and evidence (*Pirkei Avot*, the 'Chapters of the Sages' is appended to *Nezikin*). See Blackman, Philip. Ed. (1983). *Mishnayoth, Vol. 4 Order Nezikin*. Gateshead: Judaica Press.

² See for example, the Book of Judges 4.4, concerning the prophet [*n'vi'ah*] Deborah 'who was judging (*shof'tah*) Israel at that time'.

³ <https://b8ofhope.org/grantees/roots-shorashim-judur/> (Accessed: 3 November 2025).

⁴ The Alliance for Middle East Peace (ALLMEP) 'represents a network of over 180 organizations engaged in civil society peacebuilding between Israelis and Palestinians'. <https://www.allmep.org/about-us-allmep/members/> (Accessed: 10 April 2026). Meanwhile, 'It's Time' is 'a coalition of over 60 peacebuilding and shared society organizations, working together with determination and courage to end the Israeli-Palestinian conflict through a political agreement that will ensure both peoples' right to self-determination and secure lives'. <https://www.timeisnow.co.il/english> (Accessed: 10 April 2026).