

SPEECH ON PARSHAS SHOFTIM

In today's parsha, the Jews have ended their 40 years wandering the desert. They are in the country of Moab, about to cross the Jordan river into Israel. Today's parsha is one portion of long a farewell speech that Moshe delivers to the Jews before he dies. Moshe informs the Jews about the following obligations they will have upon entering the promised land.

Courts: The first paragraph is a command for the Jews, when they enter the promised land, to set up a local courts around the country, and a supreme court in the Temple, and policemen to enforce their rulings. And for the courts to judge fairly without regard to whom the litigants, and without bribery.

Witnesses: Judges should accept, as evidence, only the testimony of 2 witnesses. If a court finds that a witness testifies falsely, the court should inflict on the false witness the same punishment that the false witness tried to inflict unfairly on the innocent defendant.

King: If you want to appoint a king, it should be a Jewish one. The king should not accumulate many horses, many wives, or much wealth, and should "read the Torah every day of his life in order that he learn to fear Gd, and keep the Torah's teachings and not consider himself higher than his brethren"

Plots: When you enter the promised land, all Jews will be assigned a plot of land to farm. Except for the priests and Levites; their inheritance is to service Gd . They are financially supported by the Jews. And then Moshe lists the different types of donations that each Jew gives to the Kohens and Levites from their cattle and crops.

Misc: Don't sacrifice to Gd an animal with a blemish. Do not be influenced by the rituals of your pagan neighbors. For example, by sacrifice your children like some of them do. Don't practice black magic. Don't worship the sun, moon or stars. Don't plant an Ashaira tree, which used to be worshiped in the ancient times.

Prophets: Moshe reminded the Jews that when they were standing at the foot of Mt. Sinai and hearing the voice of Gd they were so terrified, that they asked Moshe to step in and deliver the message in place of Gd. Moshe informed them that when they are living in the promised land, Gd will periodically send other prophets to deliver his message to the Jews. Moshe told them to do what the prophet says, except if the prophet speaks in the name of a pagan god, or dissuades people from keeping your religion, or predicts something that doesn't come to pass. In all these cases, he is a false prophet and should be executed.

Cities of Refuge: Set aside 3 cities of refuge within Israel, and 3 others in Transjordan; these are cities where someone who killed someone accidentally can flee for safety against revenge.

Annihilate: As you are conquering cities outside Israel, don't hurt populations that surrender to you, keep them as your subjects to serve you and pay tribute. But cities within Israel annihilate them so that you won't be influenced by their heathen ways. (This was not always followed in practice. For example, when King David conquered the gentile city of Jerusalem and made it his capital, he befriended the gentile inhabitants.) When you clear the forest around a city you a besieging, don't cut down fruit trees.

Battle: When preparing for battle, the policemen should give the Jewish soldiers a prep speech, reminding them that Gd will help them, and should announce that anyone who is afraid or engaged to be married may go home. Similarly, anyone who just built a home or planted a vineyard and didn't benefit from them yet may go home. And then the policemen should pick army officers that will lead the soldiers into the battle (This implies the army is assembled ad hoc, when needed, instead of having a standing army with officers already in place).

Dead body: If a dead body is found at in a field, perform a ceremony in which the elders of the closest city should go to a stream and declare that they had nothing to do with the murder, and should beg Gd for forgiveness (presumably for the sin of not providing proper protection to the traveler in their region), and should break the neck of a young innocent calf.