

Shabbat Shoftim
Rabbi Daniel J. Fellman
Anshe Emeth Memorial Temple
September 9, 2005

Shabbat Shalom.

I want to begin this evening by thanking all of you. Melissa and I arrived in late June, and we have experienced an outpouring of warmth, hospitality, and friendship. We are both thrilled to be here, and both of us are excited about all of the opportunities available at Anshe Emeth and in New Jersey. Though neither Melissa nor I have yet quite figured out how to deal with New Jersey drivers, we are enjoying our new lives here, and we are looking forward to rewarding and productive years with you.

The members of the search committee, who reconstituted themselves as a transition committee, have been helpful, kind, and generous with their time and efforts. I am grateful for all that was done for us, and Melissa joins me in thanking each of you who helped us get adjusted to life here in Central Jersey.

I must also thank the staff of Anshe Emeth. To a person, everyone in the Temple office has been wonderful.

One of the decisive factors in my wanting to come here was to work with and learn from Rabbi Miller. My two months or so here confirm what I suspected last spring—Rabbi Miller is in many ways the arch-type of a good rabbi, and he is a wonderful teacher, both in public settings and in private. I have learned much already from you, and I am looking forward to learning more.

I am often asked why I decided to become a Rabbi. The truth is that many factors led me to decide to apply to the Hebrew Union College and begin the path to the rabbinate. I was raised in a family that honored education and celebrated our Jewish tradition with joy. I and my siblings were encouraged to explore our faith, but at the same time were taught to honor tradition. I was also lucky to have a rabbi during my childhood who took an interest in me, and fostered in me a sense of curiosity about the riches of Jewish tradition.

As the final year of my studies at HUC unfolded, I found myself revisiting the questions of ‘why be a rabbi.’ At first, I was bothered by the question. After all, I was nearing the completion of a rigorous five-year program, and should, I thought, not need to ask such questions. But one’s humanity has a way of sneaking up unexpectedly sometimes, and I found myself in one such experience.

So I began to contemplate a new question: ‘What do I want to do with my rabbinate?’ Many answers came to mind—I want to teach others, guide others, learn with others, grow with others, explore with others. All of those answers are true, and all are a part of who I am as a person and as a rabbi. But there is more. I also want to open up a thousands-year old tradition and let the light of modernity shine in. I want to learn, honor, and take part in Jewish rituals—both ancient and modern. And I want to work together with others to help make the world better and more just.

This week, our Torah compels us to pursue justice. Tzedek, Tzedek Tirdof, Justice, Justice shall you pursue. The exhortation towards justice fittingly comes in the midst of a review by Moses of laws concerning the judiciary and society. But the

phrasing of the command to pursue justice is different, and from this unusual form we can learn much.

Our rabbis teach that each and every word in the Torah is valuable, that no word is superfluous. Rarely do we encounter repetition in the Torah. Yet, here in this week's Parasha, Shoftim, we find the word Tzedek not once, but twice. Justice, Justice shall you pursue. So why do we have the repetition? The sages of our faith offer many answers. Some suggest that the repetition exists merely to emphasize the point. Others, however, offer their own understandings.

Elie Wiesel understands the repetition of Tzedek as a reminder of the importance of justice as a core value for all Jews. He explains the repetition by describing a man who protested evil within his town. The man protested even though no one listened. Finally, a youngster approached the man and asked why he protested when no one listened. The protester answered the child, saying, 'my child, I know that my protests for justice may not be heard or heeded. But as long as I protest, the ignorance of others will not change me.'

Maimonides, the great physician-turned-philosopher, suggests that the repetition of the word Tzedek reflects the importance of close consultation as a part of seeking justice. In pursuing justice, one can never be too cautious or too careful. Thus, the repetition exists to remind us that we must maintain regular monitoring of justice, making sure that we are always pursuing Tzedek, justice.

And Rabbi Harvey Fields, who once served this congregation, notes not only that justice is one of the most well-known dictums of the Torah, and in fact all of Jewish tradition, but also that the repetition of Tzedek indicates that society is to pursue justice in all matters—whether they be societal, political, or international. Justice, then, should be a central pillar of Jewish and secular society.

During the past few weeks, we have witnessed the testing of our resolve on matters of justice. A storm of biblical proportions wiped out cities and towns on the Gulf Coast. As our government wasted days responding, thousands of people were injured or worse. Today, we face a crisis like none this country has ever faced. And already, the blame game has begun. The people of New Orleans, southern Louisiana, Southern Mississippi, and Southern Alabama are crying out for justice. Our time for the pursuit of Justice has arrived; we must commit ourselves anew to our Torah's command to pursue justice.

The hardest-hit victims of Hurricane Katrina appear to be those who were most at risk in society: the poor, the weak, those who are, in the best of times, ignored. As much as our country wants to believe that our racial problems are in the past, the events of the last two weeks, and the slowness of a federal response, seem to indicate otherwise. I want to believe that the color of the victim's skin was not a contributing factor to the administration's response. But the facts, and the pictures, seem to be telling a different story.

Our Torah portion this evening provides a Jewish response to the events on the Gulf Coast. We must pursue justice. Tzedek Tzedek Tirdof. We must do all that we can to save people, and we must do all that we can to help people through this tragedy. The Reform movement has set up a fund, and you can go to their website, urj.org to contribute. The federation has also set up a fund, accessible via their website, ujc.org. And Anshe Emeth has been designated as an official drop-off sight for goods to be sent to

the affected areas. Specifically, we have been asked to collect cans of chili, beef stew, and pasta, as well as peanut butter and diapers. I urge you to bring a can or two of each of these items every time you visit the Temple between now and September XXX, the end-date of this drive.

Justice, in a word, I hope, will define my rabbinate. I believe that our tradition calls us to help the Almighty in the continuing creation of our world. One of our chief duties in completing creation is the pursuit of justice. On a communal level, justice means making sure that all people are treated fairly, that all people receive the tools necessary to lead productive lives. And on an individual, personal level, justice means that each of us deserves the chance to learn and explore our tradition in an open environment.

One of my favorite books is a small volume entitled “Why I am a Jew.” It was written by Edmund Fleg, a French Jewish philosopher who lived about one hundred years ago. Fleg spent many years exploring faith, and somewhat later in life, returned to the Judaism of his youth. In this volume, Fleg explains why he is a Jew. He writes, “I am a Jew because whenever there are tears and suffering, the Jew weeps; whenever the cry of despair is heard, the Jew hopes.”

Fleg’s reasons resonate deeply with me—they define me not only as a Jew, but also as a Rabbi. Together, Tzedek Tzedek Tirdof, justice, justice we will pursue. I look forward to pursuing justice with all of you, and I look forward to becoming a partner with you, and with the Almighty, to make our world a better place.