

Foreword

RABBI ANDREA L. WEISS, PhD

וַיִּגַּל כַּמַּיִם מִשְׁפָּט וַיִּצְדָּקָה כְּנַחַל אֵיתָן:

V'yigal kamayim mishpat utz'dakah k'nachal eitan.

Let justice well up like water,
righteousness like an unfailing stream.

—Amos 5:24

SOME TWENTY-SEVEN HUNDRED YEARS AGO, the prophet Amos encapsulated an inspiring vision of justice in just six Hebrew words. With the terseness that defines poetry and the evocative power that marks metaphor, this ancient Israelite expressed the expectation that individuals and the societies they inhabit will establish and execute justice. Putting this well-known verse in context, the passage quotes God scolding the Israelites:

I loathe, I spurn your festivals,
I am not appeased by your solemn assemblies.
If you offer Me burnt offerings—or your meal offerings—
I will not accept them;
I will pay no heed
To your gifts of fatlings.
Spare Me the sound of your hymns,
And let Me not hear the music of your lutes.
But let justice well up like water,
Righteousness like an unfailing stream. (Amos 5:21–24)

In the most emphatic language, God rejects religious rituals—all means humans employ to connect to or communicate with the Divine—if those who perform those rituals do not act in an ethical, upstanding manner.

Other biblical prophets reiterate this message, insisting that justice and morality take precedence over the performance of religious rites. In Isaiah 1, God spurns sacrifices, prayer, and festival gatherings since “your hands are full of blood” (1:15). Instead, God demands:

Cease to do evil;
 Learn to do good.
 Devote yourselves to justice;
 Aid the wronged.
 Uphold the rights of the orphan;
 Defend the cause of the widow. (Isaiah 1:16–17)¹

The prophetic message is simple: What matters most is justice. What God desires is a world in which humans care for one another. According to Isaiah 58:6–7, this means a world in which we help the oppressed to go free, we share our bread with the hungry, we clothe the naked, we do not ignore our kin. The prophets warn us that if there is no justice, there can be no peace:

The way of peace they do not know,
 And there is no justice where they go . . .
 We hope for light, but, look, darkness . . .
 We hope for justice but there is none,
 for rescue—it is far from us. (Isaiah 59:8–11)²

The divine demand for justice repeats throughout the Bible. In Psalm 82, God demotes the members of the divine assembly who fail to administer justice on earth. Disappointed and exasperated by these lesser deities, God declares:

How long will you judge dishonestly
 and show favor to the wicked? *selah*
 Do justice to the poor and the orphan.
 Vindicate the lowly and the wretched.
 Free the poor and the needy,
 And from the hand of the wicked save them. (Psalm 82:2–4)

Psalm 82, like Isaiah 1 and other biblical texts, associates the administration of justice with the protection of the most vulnerable individuals, which in an ancient Israelite context meant the fatherless, the widow, the stranger, and the poor.³ According to Robert Alter, this psalm presents a mythological account meant to explain “the infuriating preponderance of injustice in the world.”⁴

The Book of Job probes the “preponderance of injustice” that besets “a blameless and upright man who fears God and shuns evil” (Job 1:8). Job shouts and

struggles, striving to make sense of a world in which bad things happen to a good person and it appears that “there is no justice” (Job 19:7). In contrast, the Book of Proverbs depicts the opposite scenario, promising that rewards will come to those who cultivate the knowledge and discipline needed to live a virtuous, just life. Like other examples of ancient wisdom literature, Proverbs distills the divine demand for justice into a series of pithy sayings. For instance, Proverbs 2:8–9 encourages the listener “to keep the paths of justice” and to “understand righteousness, justice, and uprightness,” each one a “pathway of good.” Proverbs 16:8 advises, “Better a pittance in righteousness, than abundant yield without justice.” Proverbs 29:4 observes, “A king makes a land stand firm through justice, but a deceitful man destroys it.” In this biblical book, injustice does not go unpunished, and only good things happen to good people.

Turning to the Torah, the Five Books of Moses teach us not just why, but also how, to fulfill God’s demand for justice and morality. The collections of rules and case law found in the Torah turn the abstract concept of justice into concrete actions carried out in the home, in the field, and at the city gate. Take Exodus 23:2–3: “You shall neither side with the mighty to do wrong . . . nor shall you show deference to a poor person in a dispute.” Or Leviticus 19:10: “You shall not pick your vineyard bare, or gather the fallen fruit of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the stranger: I the Eternal am your God.” Or Deuteronomy 22:1: “If you see your fellow Israelite’s ox or sheep gone astray, do not ignore it; you must take it back to your peer.”⁵ Adele Berlin summarizes the common thread that binds together the Torah’s wide-ranging laws: “The goal is to create a balanced society in which the poor and weak are legally protected from the rich and strong, in which property and human lives are respected, and—most importantly—in which individuals are subject to the community and its laws.”⁶

Outside of these legal collections, various narrative passages in the Torah explore the complexities involved in carrying out the command to pursue justice.⁷ Abraham challenges God’s decision to destroy the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah: “Will You indeed sweep away the innocent along with the wicked? . . . Must not the Judge of all the earth do justly?” (Genesis 18:23, 25). The daughters of Zelophehad question the fairness of laws of inheritance: “Let not our father’s name be lost to his clan just because he had no son! Give us a holding among our father’s kinsmen!” (Numbers 27:4). After God declares, “The plea of

Zelophehad's daughters is just," Moses enacts a new law to ensure that the legal system remains responsive and equitable (Numbers 27:7–11). These and other passages preserve the ways our biblical ancestors strove to "keep justice and do righteousness" (Isaiah 56:1).

In laws and stories, poems and prayers, the imperative to practice justice permeates the Torah. *The Social Justice Torah Commentary* traces this theme from *B'reishit* to *V'zot Hab'rachah*. By bringing a social justice lens to each *parashah*, the commentators in this valuable volume shed new light on the Torah and show how these ancient texts still motivate us to seek justice today. This commentary urges us to do our part to create a world in which "justice will well up like water and righteousness like an unfailing stream."

NOTES

1. Also see Isaiah 58:1–10; Jeremiah 6:19–20; Hosea 6:6, 8:13; Joel 2:12–13; Malachi 1:10, 2:13.
2. This and the translations of Psalm 82 and Proverbs from Robert Alter, *The Hebrew Bible*, vol. 3 (New York: W. W. Norton, 2019).
3. Also see Exodus 22:20, 23:5; Deuteronomy 10:18, 14:29, 24:14, and elsewhere.
4. Alter, *The Hebrew Bible*, 200.
5. The legal collections in the Torah appear in Exodus 21–23; Leviticus 19; Deuteronomy 12–26.
6. Adele Berlin, commentary on *Parashat Ki Teitzei* in *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*, ed. Tamara Cohn Eskenazi and Andrea L. Weiss (New York: Reform Judaism Publishing, an imprint of CCAR Press, 2008), 1165.
7. Deuteronomy 16:20 famously declares, "Justice, justice you shall pursue."