

Suddenly, every morning, it's chilly when I walk Ari. There are a few leaves on the ground, and I stomp on acorns as we walk, the cracking noises that make me smile. The squirrels haven't begun to collect yet, but the trees are getting ready for winter. The first signs of the change of seasons have begun, even if you have to get up at the crack of dawn to see them. These beginning indications are subtle and easily missed.

This week's parsha, Shoftim, is exceedingly rich. It includes the famous statement of faith for Jews: Justice, justice shall you pursue. Through repetition, we learn how vital this task is for all of us. We are taught about the limitations on the behavior of a king. We learn that capital punishment requires the evidence of two witnesses, and that these witnesses must not only give evidence but must also throw the first stone. We are instructed to set up cities of refuge, so that one who slays another unintentionally has a place to flee. And we have one of my favorite teaching passages: before a battle, the generals are instructed to ask their soldiers the following 3 questions: Is there one among you who has built a new house and not dedicated it? Who has planted a vineyard but not harvested it? Has paid the bride-price but not married his fiancé? All of these are instructed to return home and finish their unfinished business. And they then ask the final question: Is there one who is afraid and disheartened? This one as well is sent home.

I am struck by this parsha in juxtaposition to Elul, which began Wednesday night. Elul is our time of preparation for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. We are taught that we are to begin the self-reflection and evaluation that is part and parcel of the holidays. What

is the connection between these legal and warfare oriented passages and our upcoming Holy Days?

How do we prepare for the holidays? For me, it begins with lots of conversations with Jayne, as we begin the task of managing the readers and ark openers and torah walkers. I start kvetching at Mike to practice the shofar. But these tasks are simply management tasks, not ones that prepare me, deep in my soul, for the real work of September.

What prepares me is questions. I find myself asking who and what I am, and who and what I wish I could be. I find that almost every year, I reprimand myself for the same behavior, set very similar goals. I realize that I am making change in myself, but that this change is terribly slow. Much like the soldiers, I am full of unfinished business. And I must return to these holidays, year after year, to assess my progress, to re-orient myself to the task, to remember that God only expects me to keep on pushing, even if I never actually make the goal.

In advance, I wish each of you a deep soul search, one that allows you to find the parts of yourself that you yearn for. I wish you an Elul filled with a sense of the task in front of us. May our mundane tasks be manageable and our meaningful tasks be challenging. And may each of us have the experience of the upcoming holidays that stretches us.

Ken y'he ratzon. May it be God's will.

Betsy Stone