

In 1999, Celestina went into labor in her remote village along Lake Tanganyika in Tanzania. Like many women in Sub-Saharan Africa, she lacked adequate delivery care. When her labor obstructed—a problem routinely solved by cesarean section in the developed world—her baby could not pass through the birth canal, even as her uterus kept contracting. Knowing this could kill them both, Celestina scraped together bus fare to reach the district hospital in Kigoma. After three harrowing days in labor, she arrived—and gave birth to her stillborn baby.

We could end the story there, one tragic entry in the maternal health crisis that kills 178,000 mothers and a million newborns each year in Sub-Saharan Africa from preventable complications.¹ But for Celestina, a darker chapter lay ahead. After burying her child, she realized she was leaking urine and feces uncontrollably. She was suffering from an obstetric fistula: her baby had pressed against her

¹“African Region’s Maternal and Newborn Mortality Declining, but Progress Still Slow,” World Health Organization, 2025, <https://www.afro.who.int/news/african-regions-maternal-and-newborn-mortality-declining-progress-still-slow>.

pelvis for days, killing the surrounding tissue and leaving a hole connecting her vagina, bladder, and rectum. For the next decade, she reeked of fluids she could not contain and lived as a social pariah—unemployable, ostracized, punished for the symptoms of a condition no one around her understood.²

That changed when a community health volunteer told her about a simple surgery available at a clinic in Bugando, 300 miles away. Celestina scraped together the funds to reach it, and there her life changed forever. She received fistula closure surgery along with customized care—nutrition, physiotherapy, counseling, rehabilitation, vocational training—all funded by the Fistula Foundation at a cost of roughly \$650.³

For comparison, that same amount could buy you and three friends a lavish dinner at Arthur's Steakhouse: appetizers, steaks, shared sides, chocolatey desserts, and a bottle of good champagne.

² Tarah DeSousa, "My First Encounter with a Fistula Patient - Fistula Foundation," Fistula Foundation (Nonprofit), August 4, 2022, <https://fistulafoundation.org/news/my-first-encounter-with-a-fistula-patient/>.

³ Peter Singer, *10th Anniversary Edition: The Life You Can Save How to Do Your Part to End World Poverty* (Www.Thelifeyoucansave.Org, 2019).

While I have no problem with fine dining, it raises the question of what matters more to us: a luxurious dinner with friends, or giving a young woman her life back? Or, closer to our daily lives: the \$8 cup of Starbucks coffee, or saving a child from malaria by donating that same amount to organizations that spend \$4.50 per net to acquire and distribute them across the global south?⁴

I don't want this to become a diatribe about our spending choices. Instead, I want us to interrogate our apathy to the suffering of others and ask whether that posture aligns with our sense of justice, and if not, what we should do about it.

First, what do we mean by that magical, elusive word: justice? This week's parshah, *Shoftim*—literally, Judges—offers what I'd consider the starting point for any Jewish social justice work: *tzedek, tzedek, tirdof*. Justice, justice you shall pursue. That line follows commandments establishing a judicial system, so on its face it

⁴ “How Much Does It Cost to Save a Life – February 2024 Version,” GiveWell, 2024, <https://www.givewell.org/how-much-does-it-cost-to-save-a-life/february-2024-version>.

seems concerned only with the judiciary. Some critics of Reform Judaism's emphasis on social justice seize on this, arguing that rooting our commitment to repairing the world in this verse distorts Torah to serve an agenda they consider inferior to the real task: preserving Judaism exclusively through ritual and prayer.

I think that view is mistaken. Read in full, *Shoftim*'s charge is a call to universal justice, incumbent on all of us. But even granting the critics their premise—that only judges are commanded here—we should ask: who is a judge? At the most basic level, a judge is someone who gathers relevant information, determines what is true, and renders a decision that affects those with a stake in the outcome. Sometimes that judge carries the backing of the state; sometimes, like a rabbinic court in the U.S. or a World Cup referee, their authority comes from an institution instead. And sometimes it comes from neither: think of a bystander who witnesses a hit-and-run and must decide what justice demands.

Or think of yourself drawing up next month's budget: bills, school supplies, groceries, and the non-essentials—your Starbucks coffee, the filet from Arthur's. Something is missing from that list, something we know about and too often ignore because it is uncomfortable and far away: women like Celestina, and the one thousand children under five who die of malaria every day.⁵ We are judges at that moment. We have the information; we can find reputable sources; and every time we act or don't, we render a decision that weighs our caffeine habit against the suffering of the world's poorest.

This same reasoning holds institutionally. Religious organizations, law firms, universities, hospitals all make financial decisions daily. A hospital can continue lax policies around elective induction—which cost some state hospital systems over five million

⁵ “Malaria in Africa - UNICEF Data,” 2023, <https://data.unicef.org/topic/child-health/malaria/>.

dollars a year in additional neonatal care—or tighten them and redirect the savings toward fistula closure surgery in Tanzania.⁶

According to Ramban, it isn't only these routine allocations that make us judges, but our own capacity for internal reckoning: “if you will judge yourself [knowing whence you came, and whither you are going, and before Whom you are about to give account and reckoning] you will live. If not, God will judge you and affirm [God's judgment over you] against your will.”⁷ *Shoftim* thus obligates each of us to scrutinize our standing in the world, whether we have acted justly, and to adjust accordingly.

But how do we adjust, and to whom do we owe it?

Parshat *Shoftim* details how we should treat a diverse community—the poor, the landless, the accused, even the trees. Most striking, though, is the justice owed to murdered strangers found outside of the town whose killer is unknown. When such a

⁶ Wasteful Spending in Massachusetts Medical System, accessed August 14, 2026, <https://www.mass.gov/doc/chapter-3-wasteful-spending/download>.

⁷ Ramban on Deuteronomy 16:20:1.

body was found, elders of the Sanhedrin measured to determine the nearest city, which then took a community-purchased calf that had never worked to a rushing river and broke its neck there, after which the elders washed their hands and declared: “Our hands did not shed this blood, nor did we see this with our eyes.” With the ritual complete, God granted the city atonement.

This ceremony is as much an act of justice for the victim as a proclamation of innocence for the community. Parshat Shoftim recognizes that we have moral and religious obligations to strangers who live and die beyond our community—even injustices we did not cause—and that this obligation is additional to, not a substitute for, our obligations closer to home.

But today, most of us do not regularly happen upon murdered strangers while driving from Little Rock to Nashville whose only recourse is to be buried in Memphis and for a cow to be decapitated in the Mississippi. What we do have when we think about those strangers physically distant from our communities and who

experience injustice which we did not cause, is the global poor: the nearly 700 million people, most concentrated in Sub-Saharan Africa, living on less than \$2.15 a day.⁸ We owe them the same considerations of justice we'd extend to the vulnerable here at temple, in Little Rock, in Arkansas, and throughout the U.S.

It is one thing to consider justice; the verse demands we pursue it. How? We could adopt the radical standard the philosopher Peter Singer proposes in *The Life You Can Save*: cutting unnecessary spending and donating the savings “until you have reduced yourself to the point where if you give any more, you will be sacrificing something nearly as important as preventing malaria.”⁹ Or we could take the more moderate view of ibn Ezra, who taught that justice is mentioned twice “to indicate that one should pursue justice whether it would be to his advantage or loss”—accepting that preventing

⁸“Poverty, Prosperity, and Planet Report 2024 Pathways out of the Polycrisis,” OpenKnowledge, 2024, <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/f75dd18d-4e3f-44f9-b455-7f0d8e189609/content>.

⁹ Peter Singer, *10th Anniversary Edition: The Life You Can Save How to Do Your Part to End World Poverty*, pp 22.

others' suffering may require us, individually or institutionally, to forgo some non-essential spending, and then redirecting those savings to where they do the most good per dollar.¹⁰

Two of my favorite resources for finding ways to improve the lives of the world's poorest are TheLifeYouCanSave.org and GiveWell.org. We can also urge our workplaces toward corporate matching or pro bono programs, give our time to humanitarian relief organizations, or call our elected officials about foreign humanitarian assistance. The point isn't to catalog every option—it's to begin.

I know how small some of this sounds. After the weight of Celestina's story and the charge of *Shoftim*, so much of the answer comes down to a website, a phone call, a decision at the kitchen table. But that is what pursuit looks like. Justice is rarely a grand gesture; more often it is the unglamorous work of gathering facts,

¹⁰ Ramban on Deuteronomy 16:20

judging honestly what they demand, and acting on the answer. That is the true meaning of *tzedek, tzedek, tirdof*.

And when we do it, we answer something the elders in the valley could not. Standing over the calf, they declared, "Our hands did not shed this blood, nor did we see this with our eyes." We no longer have that comfort. We have seen. We know Celestina's name, and the decade she spent as a pariah for want of a surgery that cost less than a nice dinner for four. We know a net can save a child, and we know where a dollar does the most good. The elders' declaration of innocence is closed to us. What remains open is the pursuit.

So let us pursue it. *Tzedek, tzedek, tirdof*. May we have the honesty to judge ourselves, the courage to act on what we find, and the resolve to widen the circle of those we count as our own—until it reaches from this sanctuary to a village along Lake Tanganyika, and to every stranger whose life our justice can touch.

Shabbat shalom.