

5784 – Deuteronomy 16-21 – Shoftim (Judges)

Hi! I'm Daniel Loewenstein, and you're watching Aleph Beta. Welcome to *Parshat Shoftim*.¹

In this *parsha*, we learn about the command to appoint שֹׁטְרִים (*shotrim*). You know, *shotrim*, the ones with the super important jobs, the ones who do the ... um ... huh. What do the *shotrim* do?

What's the Job of *Shotrim*, the Bible's Police Officers?

Well, the word *shotrim* means officers or enforcers, and in modern Hebrew, *shotrim* are the police. So, is that what the Biblical *shotrim* are? Is their job to give out tickets for *kashrut* violations, or arrest people who fall behind on their tithes? Do they have undercover units that bust up idolatry cells?

The truth is, we know almost nothing about the job of the *shotrim* from the Torah. In fact, they only have one job that we actually hear about—and it doesn't sound anything like the role of a police officer or enforcer.

In *Devarim* chapter 20, the Torah talks about war, and it describes this kind of scripted scene that's supposed to happen before a battle is joined. It starts with a כֹּהֵן (*cohen*) approaching the people—וַיִּגַּשׁ הַכֹּהֵן (*v'ni-gash ha-cohen*)—and reassuring them that they shouldn't be afraid, because God is with them. And once that's done, then that's when we meet the *shotrim*. They step up, and you know what they do? They ... send people home. They say:

מִי־הָאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר בָּנָה בַּיִת־תְּדֹשׁ וְלֹא חָנְכוּ
chadash v'lo cha'na-cho, if anyone built a new house, but hasn't lived in it yet? (Deu 20:5)

יָלֵךְ וַיָּשָׁב לְבֵיתוֹ (*yelēd v'ya-shov l'vei-to*), Go, leave and return home. Go break in that house.

And if anyone's planted a vineyard but hasn't gotten to enjoy its fruits yet, same deal. יָלֵךְ וַיָּשָׁב לְבֵיתוֹ (*yelēd v'ya-shov l'vei-to*)—Go home. Or if a person is betrothed, and is waiting to get married, or even if he's just scared, and he might bring down morale, once again, יָלֵךְ וַיָּשָׁב לְבֵיתוֹ. Go home.

So let me ask you: Is that the kind of thing *you'd* expect a police officer to say? “Sir, were you aware you were traveling 20 miles over the speed limit? That's a pretty hefty ticket right there. Oh, wait, do you by any

chance have a new house? Well, you should've said something! Go on home and we'll forget all about this.”

It's ridiculous. It's insane. Any officer who'd say that *clearly* doesn't understand the job. Police maintain order, and they do that by holding people accountable. So why are the *shotrim*, the supposed enforcers, letting people off the hook?

I think there might be a clue to solving this mystery in another place in the Torah.

Connections Between Bible Verses on Law Enforcement

See, this isn't the first place where we hear about “*shotrim*.” There's actually another place, way back in the Book of *Shmot*, where we hear all about *another* set of *shotrim*. *Shotrim* who actually act like enforcers.

So maybe, if we read that *first* story about *shotrim* in *Shmot*, it can give us some answers about the strange role of the *shotrim* we're seeing here. So let's go to the book of *Shmot*, and see what we see.

Here's the scene: Moshe and Aharon have just told Pharaoh to let the Israelites go for the very first time, and Pharaoh is unimpressed. But he doesn't just say no—he actually pushes back. Here's what happens:

וַיֵּצֵא פַרְעֹה בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא אֶת־הַנְּגִשִׁים בָּעַם וְאֶת־שֹׁטְרָיו לְאָמֹר
va-y'tzav paro bayom ha-hu et ha-nog-shim ba-am v'et shot-rav leimor, on that day, Pharaoh issued a command to the nation's taskmasters (Exo 5:6), and ... their *shotrim*, their officers. There they are. And Pharaoh tells them,
לֹא תֵאֱסָפוּן לָתֵת תְּבָנִים לָעָם לְלֶבֶן הַלְּבָנִים־כְּתָמוּל שְׁלֶשֶׁם

lo tosifun la-tet tevel la-am lil-bon hal-vei-nim kit-mol shil-shom, don't continue to provide straw like you have been (Exo 5:7).

הֵם יִלְכוּ וְקִשְׁשׁוּ לָהֶם תְּבָנִים
hem yel-chu v'kosh-shu tevel, let the people go and gather it for themselves. I want the bricks at the same rate I've been getting them up until now—but I want you to make them gather the raw materials too.

In other words, pile on the work, and bury them with it.

So here we've got our *shotrim*. And they *do* sound a lot more *shotrim-ish* than the ones in *Shoftim*, right? They *sound* like enforcers. Pharaoh issues commands, and they're the ones whose job it is to make sure the people get them done.

So we've got *shotrim* here, in *Shmot*, and we've got *shotrim* in our *parsha*. But is that where the similarity ends? Is that the only thing that connects these two stories?

The Power Structure of Biblical Law Enforcement

¹ <https://members.alephbeta.org/playlist/law-enforcement-in-the-bible>

I don't think so. Let me ask you: what's the power structure here in *Shmot*? Who's in charge of whom? Well, the Israelites are clearly at the bottom; they're the slaves. But go back to that verse:

וַיִּצַו פַּרְעֹה בַיּוֹם הַהוּא אֶת-הַנְּגִשִּׁים בְּעַם וְאֶת-שׂוֹטְרָיו (va-y'tzav par-o bayom ha-hu et ha-nog-shim ba-am v'et shot-rav), Pharaoh commanded the **taskmasters** and the **officers**.

So that means we've got these officers and taskmasters in the middle, and at the top, we've got Pharaoh, the king, the one making the laws, the one telling his officers what commands to give the people.

Well, what about the structure in *Shoftim*, in our pre-battle scene? Well, you've also got the Israelite people, and the *shotrim* above them, giving the people directions. And you've got the כהן, the priest, who opens the scene with his words of reassurance and inspiration. And, there's also someone on top of the כהן—someone telling the כהן and the officers what to say, what commands to give the people: God.

And that means that in both places, we're seeing the same four-level structure: the people at the very bottom, the king at the very top, and in the middle, these two intermediate positions: *shotrim*, and another role—in *Shmot*, the taskmasters, and in *Shoftim*, the כהן.

Studying the Parallels to Law Enforcement in the Bible

And let's zero in for a minute on the כהן—taskmaster connection. Do you remember the way the *Torah* introduces the part of the כהן, before his speech? The *first* thing the כהן is supposed to do is draw close to the people—וַיִּגַּשׁ הַכֹּהֵן (v'nigash ha-cohen). *Nigash*. נ (nun) ג (gimel) ש (shin). That's the same way you spell *Nogesh*, taskmaster.

I think the *Torah* is hinting to us that **the כהן and the taskmasters are inverse parallels of each other**—one is a *nigash*, someone who draws close to the people to inspire and uplift, and one is a *nogesh*, someone who oppresses the people and beats them down.

So we've got the *shotrim* connection, the power structure connection, and the *nogesh nigash* connection. And if we read through the story carefully, I think we can see one more connection. If you look through the story in *Shmot*, there's a word that keeps coming up, a word that Pharaoh and the *Shotrim* both use in their commands to the people: לֶךְ (*lech*). Go.

לָכוּ לְסִבְלֹתֵיכֶם (l'chu l'siv-loitechem), says Pharaoh: Go back to your burdens (Exo 5:4).

הֵם יֵלְכוּ וְקִשְׁשׁוּ (hem yeil-chu v'kosh-shu), let *them* go and do the gathering.

לָכוּ קַחוּ לָכֶם תְּבֹן (l'chu k'chu lachem vevel), say the *Shotrim*.

Go, take straw (Exo 5:11).

לָכוּ עֲבֹדוּ (l'chu iv-du), Go and get to work (Exo 5:18).

The word “go” by itself is completely neutral, but in Egypt, it picks up this awful connotation of oppression: **go, bear your burdens, and stop complaining because nobody cares.**

Now look at *Shoftim*. Do we find that same word coming up in our scene? We do. It's in the words the *Shotrim* say to the people as they're sending them home: whoever built a new house, וַיֵּלֶךְ וַיָּשָׁב לְבֵיתוֹ (yei-leich v'ya-shov l'veito)—go but not to work. Go home. Leave your work behind. And it's the same for every line they say—whoever planted a vineyard, whoever is betrothed, whoever is afraid: וַיֵּלֶךְ וַיָּשָׁב לְבֵיתוֹ ((yei-leich v'ya-shov l'veito). It's that same word that had that oppressive meaning in Egypt—yet here, it means the opposite.

When you add it all up, it sounds like everything about our pre-battle scene in *Shoftim*—the כהן, the *shotrim*, the directions to the people—it's all ... based on Egypt. God is taking Pharaoh's system, and using it as a model for His own system. But why? Why would He do that?

Shoftrim and Pharaoh

Well, I have a theory. And to explain it, I'd like to tell you about a conversation I had a few years ago. I had a friend who ran the billing department of a hospital, and we were talking about some of the things he learned from his job. And he told me that he had this one rule of management that was the most important thing he learned: He said that when someone asks for time off to spend time with a sick relative, or to watch a school play, **you always find a way to give it to them.** If it means they'll have to make up the hours, or someone will have to cover shifts, or whatever it is, **you figure it out and make it work.**

You have to make sure they know that you see them as people, and you have their backs. Because there's nothing more demoralizing than having a boss who thinks your life doesn't matter. That all you are is part of the machine, and if your life interferes with that, that makes you worth less, makes you a liability. No one wants to work in a place where the job means everything, and you mean nothing.

But that's exactly the system that Pharaoh was building in Egypt. He treated the Israelites like they were his brick factory, and the minute they expressed a personal interest, asked for a break to go serve their God, he

added *more* work, until their needs and wants as individual people were crushed under its weight.

What Is the Bible Saying About Law Enforcement?

And so God comes and says, I also have a lot of work for you to do. I've got hundreds of commandments for you to follow, so that you can bring about My will. But I don't see My will the same way that Pharaoh saw his. **It's not supposed to overwhelm you and crush you, until there's no place left for your personal concerns.** I respect you, **I see the fundamental dignity of every person,** and I want you to be able to experience the personal joys of your lives. And so I have a different law enforcement system.

On the surface, it might look like the same system as Pharaoh. I'm at the head, and I've got these officers who see that the people do My will. But **instead of a *nogesh*, someone who oppresses, I have a *nigash*, someone who uplifts.** Instead of *shotrim* demanding people get to work, I have *shotrim* who tell people to go home.

When there are people on the verge of important milestones, like getting married, or breaking in a new house, and if they fight for me, they might never get to have those experiences, I don't want that. **I care about My mission—but I care about My people, too.**

The Torah doesn't tell us anything about what *shotrim* do, except for this one law about sending people home from the front lines. And I think the reason is that the job of the *shotrim* is mostly self-evident: if you're setting up a system of police, then, yeah, obviously they're going to be expected to enforce the law. But what the Torah *did* choose to elaborate on was something that wasn't obvious. The fact that, **as the *shotrim* are going about enforcing the law, it's also their job to respect and care about the people.** And **the importance of upholding the law can't overshadow that.**

Do the rules need to be upheld? Of course. But never to the point where you violate human dignity. That's Pharaoh's way, not God's.

1. *The truth is, we know almost nothing about the job of the shotrim from the Torah.*

a. Another example of the necessity of an Oral Torah.²

2. *I think the Torah is hinting to us that the **כהן** and the taskmasters are inverse parallels of each other—one is a *nigash*, someone who draws close to the people to inspire and uplift, and one is a *nogesh*, someone who oppresses the people and beats them down.*

a. This same type of anti-thetical quality characterizes the roles of the Messiah and the Anti-Messiah.

1) The Messiah facilitates salvation, freedom and self-awareness—Satan facilitates bondage, conformity and ignorance.

Isaiah 53:12

¹²Therefore I will give him (i.e, the Messiah) a portion among the great ... because **he poured out his life unto death**, and was numbered with the transgressors. For he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.

Hebrews 2:14-15

¹⁴Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that **by his death he might break the power of him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil**—¹⁵and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death.

2) The Messiah is humble—Satan is arrogant.

Matthew 11:28-30

²⁸"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. ²⁹Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for **I am gentle and humble in heart**, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."

Isaiah 14:12-14

¹²How you have fallen from heaven, morning star, son of the dawn! You have been cast down to the earth, you who once laid low the nations! ¹³You said in your heart, "I will ascend to the heavens; I will raise my throne above the stars of God; I will sit enthroned on the mount of assembly ... (on the lofty mountains towards the North). ¹⁴I will ascend above the tops of the clouds; I will make myself like the Most High."

3) The Messiah will reign as King by heritage, by right, in truth—Satan aspires to reign as King by demand, by fabrication, in falsehood.

Psalms 2:1-12

¹Why do the nations conspire and the peoples plot in vain? ²The kings of the earth rise up and the rulers band together **against the LORD and against his anointed**, saying, ³"Let us ... throw off their shackles." ⁴The One enthroned in heaven laughs; the Lord scoffs at them. ⁵He rebukes them in his anger ... saying, ⁶"**I have installed my king on Zion, my holy mountain.**" ⁷I will proclaim the LORD's decree: He said to me, "You are my son; today I have become your father. ⁸Ask me, and I will make the nations your inheritance ... ⁹You will break them with a rod of iron; you will dash them to pieces like pottery." ¹⁰Therefore, you kings, be wise; be warned, you rulers of the earth. ¹¹Serve the LORD with fear

² See "5784 - Deuteronomy 11-16 - Re-eh (See)."

and celebrate his rule with trembling. ¹²**Kiss his son, or he will be angry and your way will lead to your destruction**, for his wrath can flare up in a moment. Blessed are all who take refuge in him.

2Thessalonians. 2:3-10

³Don't let anyone deceive you ... for that day will not come until the rebellion occurs and **the man of lawlessness** is revealed ... **He will oppose and will exalt himself over everything that is called God or is worshipped, so that he sets himself up in God's temple, proclaiming himself to be God.**

⁵... when I was with you I used to tell you these things? ... ⁶you know what is holding him back, so that he may be revealed at the proper time ... ⁷the one who now holds it back will continue to do so till he is taken out of the way. And then **the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord Yeshua will overthrow with the breath of his mouth and destroy by the splendor of his coming.** ⁹The coming of the lawless one will be in accordance with the work of Satan displayed in all kinds of counterfeit miracles, signs and wonders ...

3. *But that's exactly the system that Pharaoh was building in Egypt. He treated the Israelites like they were his brick factory, and the minute they expressed a personal interest, asked for a break to go serve their God, he added more work, until their needs and wants as individual people were crushed under its weight.*

a. (Messiah Yeshua) redeemed us from **the curse that has been brought through the law** by becoming a curse for us (Gal 3:13). He substituted Himself in our place and upon the cross took the punishment that is justly ours **so that we are no longer under the curse of the Law**. In doing so, He fulfilled and upheld the requirements of the Law. This does not mean that Christians are to be lawless, as some advocate today—a teaching called *antinomianism*.³ Rather, it means that **we are free from the Mosaic Law and instead under the law of (Messiah)**, which is to love God with all of our being and to love our neighbors as we love ourselves.⁴

³ The word *antinomianism* comes from two Greek words, *anti*, meaning "against"; and *nomos*, meaning "law." *Antinomianism* means "against the law." Theologically, antinomianism is the belief that there are no moral laws God expects Christians to obey. Antinomianism takes a biblical teaching to an unbiblical conclusion. **The biblical teaching is that Christians are not required to observe the Old Testament Law as a means of salvation.** When (Yeshua) died on the cross, **He fulfilled the Old Testament Law** (Rom 10:4; Gal 3:23-25; Eph 2:15). **The unbiblical conclusion is that there is no moral law God expects Christians to obey.**

⁴ <https://www.gotquestions.org/not-under-the-law.html>

(Messiah) became **the end of the Law** by virtue of what He did on earth through His sinless life and His sacrifice on the cross. So, the Law no longer has any bearing over us because its demands have been fully met in the Lord (Yeshua the Messiah). **Faith in (Messiah) who satisfied the righteous demands of the Law restores us into a pleasing relationship with God and keeps us there. No longer under the penalty of the Law, we now live under the law of grace in the love of God.**

1) Romans 10:4

⁴Messiah is **the culmination of the law** so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes.

CJB—For **the goal** at which the Torah aims is the Messiah, who offers righteousness to everyone who trusts.

MIT—For **the terminal point** of the law is Messiah, who is the basis of righteousness for all who believe.

2) Galatians 3:23-25

²³Before the coming of this faith, we were held in custody under the law ... ²⁴the law was our guardian until Messiah came that we might be justified by faith. ²⁵Now that this faith has come, **we are no longer under a guardian.**

CJB—²³Now before the time for this trusting faithfulness came, we were imprisoned in subjection to the system which results from perverting the *Torah* into legalism, kept under guard until **this yet-to-come trusting faithfulness would be revealed.** ²⁴Accordingly, the *Torah* functioned as a custodian until the Messiah came, so that we might be declared righteous on the ground of trusting and being faithful. ²⁵But now that the time for this trusting faithfulness has come, we are no longer under a custodian.

a) The Torah's true meaning, which the Messiah upholds, Greek *ton nomon tou Christou* "the law of the Messiah," a phrase found only once in the (Apostolic Writings) ... But the phrase appears in the Midrash Rabbah on Ecclesiastes 11:8; "The *Torah* which a person learns in this world is 'vanity' in comparison with **the Torah of the Messiah.**"

And its meaning there is essentially the same as in this verse: **the Torah as it will be taught by the Messiah himself, the Torah as upheld by the Messiah.**

Here the question is whether Yeshua instituted a new *Torah* different from the *Torah* given at Mount Sinai. In other words, is **fulfilling** "the law of the Messiah" different from fulfilling the Law of Moshe? I express my negative answer in my interpretive

rendering, which by its wording excludes the common, but in my opinion mistaken, traditional Christian view that (Yeshua) abrogated the supposedly legalistic *Torah* of Moshe and inaugurated in its place a “Law of Love.”

This traditional view come into direct conflict with one of the most firmly held tenets of Orthodox Judaism, the eternity or non-abrogability of the *Torah*. Each morning Orthodox Jews repeat in their prayers the *Yigdal* hymn, which affirms that:

“God gave the *Torah* of truth to his people
Through the prophet, who was ‘faithful in his house’
God will not alter his eternal Law or exchange it for another.”

The “prophet ... faithful in his house” is Moshe (see Num 12:7 and the *midrash* on it in (Heb 3:1-6).

Yeshua himself reassured his hearers that he had not come to abolish the Torah (Mat 5:17). However, the eternity of the *Torah* does allow for changes in its historical manifestation and application to society; indeed Judaism itself provides numerous examples. Moreover, Jewish tradition includes a significant strand of expecting that when the Messiah comes, there will be a transformation of *Torah* (see Acts 6:13-14; Heb 7:12) ...⁵

3) Ephesians 2:14-15

¹⁴For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one **and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility,** ¹⁵**by setting aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations.** His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace ...

CJB—¹⁴For he himself is our *shalom*- he has made us both one and has broken down the *m'chitzah* which divided us ¹⁵**by destroying in his own body the enmity occasioned by the Torah** ... He did this in order to create in union with himself from the two groups a single new humanity and thus make *shalom* ...

- How would doing away with the Torah facilitate making “peace” between Jews and Gentiles?
- And why is the Torah something that everyone observes during the Millenium?

Isaiah 2:2-3 (cf. Micah 4:1)

³In the last days the mountain of the LORD's temple will be established as chief among the mountains ... **all nations** will

stream to it. ³**Many peoples** will come and say, “Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob. **He will teach us his ways, so that we may walk in his paths.**” **The law will go out from Zion, the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.**

Zechariah 14:16-19

¹⁶Then the survivors from all the nations that have attacked Jerusalem will go up year after year to worship the King, the LORD Almighty, **and to celebrate the Festival of Tabernacles.**

b. Deuteronomy 30:11-14

¹¹Now what I am commanding you today **is not too difficult for you or beyond your reach.** ¹²It is not up in heaven, so that you have to ask, “Who will ascend into heaven to get it and proclaim it to us so we may obey it?” ¹³Nor is it beyond the sea, so that you have to ask, “Who will cross the sea to get it and proclaim it to us so we may obey it?” ¹⁴No, **the word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart so you may obey it.**

1) **NOT for salvation**—Jews have NEVER believed they are saved by observing the Torah. The Torah was given to Israel *after* they were redeemed from Egypt! This is a Dispensationalism⁶ idea.

Have there been Jews who have embraced the “letter” of the Torah without affirming its “spirit”?—Of course! That is why **the connection between them** is so often emphasized in the teaching of Yeshua. *See the Sermon on the Mount (Mat 5-7).*

c. Matthew 6:25-33

²⁵“Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes? ²⁶Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. **Are you not much more valuable than they?** ²⁷Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life? ²⁸“And why do you worry about clothes? See how the flowers of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. ²⁹Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. ³⁰If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, **will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith?**

⁶ Dispensationalism is a theological framework that views history as divided into distinct periods in which God interacts with mankind in specific ways. Each of these periods is known as a *dispensation*. The defining characteristics of a dispensation are the distinct governing relationship in which God interacts with mankind during that period, and the resulting responsibility placed upon mankind in that period.

⁵ Stern, *Jewish New Testament Commentary*, (Jewish New Testament Publications), p. 539-540.