

This week's parashah, *Shoftim*, contains the famous passage, *tzedek, tzedek tirdof, justice, justice shall you pursue*. In *Midrash D'varim Rabbah* we learn that the pursuit of justice was more important than the sacrifices that took place in the Temple in Jerusalem. The rabbis gave four reasons for this thinking. 1) While sacrifices could only take place inside the Temple, the pursuit of justice must take place *both* inside and outside the Temple; 2) Whereas sacrifices could only atone for unintentional, accidental sins, acts of righteousness and justice also atone for our intentional sins; 3) Whereas sacrifices are offered by humans, even God is obligated to practice justice and righteousness; and 4) Whereas sacrifices are significant only in this world, righteousness and justice will remain a cornerstone in the world to come ([Deuteronomy Rabbah 5:3](#)).

For us, having entered Elul, we can apply these 4 ideas to our own spiritual preparations for the High Holy Days. 1) While we often tend to focus on the repair that is needed in our immediate relationships and communal circles, we must push ourselves to look beyond. How can we participate in the repair outside of our own personal spaces? 2) It is easy to acknowledge and apologise for our accidental mistakes, it is harder to own up to the things we did knowingly, like maintaining consumer practices that harm the environment or refusing to confront and address our learned biases and our privilege. And yet, if we are really pursuing justice and repair, we must confront these things both within ourselves and within our communities. 3) No one is exempt from the work of repair and the pursuit of justice. Not even God. It doesn't matter how much *tzedakah* you give or how nice you've been to other people, or how tired you are or whether you had a really hard year. There is no excuse for not doing this work. There is no opting out. 4) What we do now, matters later. We may not all believe that there is a life after this one where justice is meted out, but it's harder to ignore the truth of natural consequences. Everything we do has a consequence, whether we are aware of it or not. If we fail to consider the consequences of our choices and our actions, we have not fully engaged in *t'shuva* or in the pursuit of justice. At the

very least, the way we live our lives will impact the way we are remembered after we are gone.

Even though many of us are feeling a deeper level of exhaustion and perhaps even despair than we did before the pandemic, we must figure out how to dig deep and find the energy for self-reflection. Even if we just choose one small thing - one new commitment, it can have wide-ranging impact, in our own lives, and beyond.

By Rabbi Emma Gottlieb