

TORAH FOR K-3 · PARASHAT HASHAVUA

פָּרַשַׁת שׁוֹפְטִים

Parashat Shoftim for Kids

Torah reading: Deuteronomy 16:18-21:9

Read on Shabbat: August 15, 2026 · September 4, 2027 · August 26, 2028 (diaspora)

THE STORY IN TWO MINUTES

What happens in this parasha?

The parasha opens with a job for every town: “Judges and officers you shall appoint in all your gates.” Long ago, the gate of a town was where people gathered, met, and settled arguments. So Hashem says: in every single place where people live, set up fair judges — shoftim — so that no one is ever left without someone wise and kind to help make things right. That’s where this parasha gets its name: Shoftim means “judges.”

Then comes one of the most famous lines in the whole Torah, and it’s short enough for a child to memorize: Tzedek tzedek tirdof — “Justice, justice you shall pursue.” The word for fairness is said twice, because the Torah really, really means it: don’t just wish things were fair — run after fairness and chase it down. To keep things honest, the Torah adds two rules: use true scales when you weigh and measure, and a judge must never take a shochad, a gift to decide a case. Why? Because even a wise person can start to see crookedly when someone slips them a present. Better to keep your eyes clear and play fair.

Next, the Torah talks about a king — and gives a surprising rule. A king must write his very own Sefer Torah by hand and keep it close, reading it all his life. Why? So that the most powerful person in the land never feels he is above everyone else. A good leader follows the very same rules as the people he leads. The king bends his head over the same Torah a child learns from. Nobody is too big, too strong, or too important to be fair.

The parasha ends with caring built right into the land. The Torah says that even in hard times, you must not chop down a fruit tree — a rule called bal tashchit, “do not destroy.” A tree that gives apples or figs is a friend; we protect it. And the Torah reminds us about the cities of refuge, the arei miklat — safe towns spread across the land where someone who caused harm by accident could run and be kept safe. From fair judges to honest scales to humble kings to protected trees to safe cities, the whole parasha is one big song about the same idea: build a world that is fair and kind.

THE ONE BIG IDEA

Don’t just hope the world is fair — chase after fairness. The Torah says it twice on purpose: tzedek tzedek tirdof. Set up honest judges, weigh things truly, and remember that everyone — even a king — follows the same good rules.

READY TO TEACH · AGES 5–9

The 30-minute lesson

- 1 Tell the story** 6 MIN

Start at the town gate with judges in every place, then land hard on the big motto: tzedek tzedek tirdof — chase after fairness, said twice because we mean it. Add honest scales, the humble king who follows the rules too, and protecting fruit trees.
- 2 Wonder together** 5 MIN

Ask: “The Torah says ‘fairness, fairness’ — the same word twice. Why do you think it says it two times instead of one? When is being fair really, really hard?”
- 3 Learn the Hebrew word** 4 MIN

This week’s word: tzedek — fairness, justice, doing what’s right. Say the whole motto slowly together: tzedek tzedek tirdof. Clap once on each “tzedek” so the doubling sticks in their ears.
- 4 Play “The Honest Scales”** 10 MIN

Make a simple balance from a hanger and two cups (or just use a kitchen scale). Let your child weigh out a fair share of a snack — raisins, crackers — into two cups so each is exactly even. Talk about how a judge with honest scales never cheats anyone. Then play “be the fair judge”: bring a small family ‘case’ (whose turn? who chooses the song?) and let your child decide it fairly, giving a reason.
- 5 Wrap up by chasing fairness** 5 MIN

End on the verb: tirdof means “chase after.” Ask your child to name one fair thing they can chase after this week — sharing evenly, telling the truth, including someone left out. Send them off as a little fairness-chaser.

HEBREW, ONE WORD AT A TIME

This week's Hebrew words

| SAY IT | WHAT IT MEANS | HEBREW |
|-----------------------------|--|------------------------|
| <i>shoftim</i> | Judges — the fair helpers we set up in every town; the parasha's name | שופטים |
| <i>tzedek</i> | Fairness, justice — doing what is right | צֶדֶק |
| <i>tzedek tzedek tirdof</i> | “Justice, justice you shall pursue” — chase after fairness; the week's motto | צֶדֶק צֶדֶק תִּרְדּוּף |
| <i>shochad</i> | A bribe — a gift a judge must never take, so he stays fair | שֹׁחַד |
| <i>melech</i> | A king — who must follow the same Torah rules as everyone else | מֶלֶךְ |
| <i>bal tashchit</i> | “Do not destroy” — protect fruit trees and don't waste good things | בַּל תִּשְׁחִית |

AT THE SHABBAT TABLE

Three questions to ask

- The Torah says “fairness, fairness” — the same word twice. Why do you think we have to chase after fairness instead of just waiting for it to happen?
- A king has to write his own Sefer Torah so he remembers he's not above the rules. Why is it good when the most powerful person still follows the same rules as everyone else?
- The Torah says to protect a fruit tree even in hard times. What is one living thing near our home that we can take good care of?

A GENTLE NOTE FOR PARENTS

Parashat Shoftim has a lovely, sunny name — “Judges” — and most of it is exactly the kind of thing children should hear: fairness, honesty, kind leaders, and caring for trees. Toward the end, the portion also speaks to grown-ups about hard times and what to do in difficult situations, including a quiet ritual when something sad has happened. None of that needs to be opened with young children. If a question comes up, you can say simply: “The Torah also speaks to grown-ups about hard times, and even then it says: protect the fruit trees and act with fairness.” For K–3, the heart of this week is tzedek tzedek tirdof — chasing after what's right.

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