SUMMARY OF SHOFETIM

The Torah commands the appointment of judges in every city of Israel. Judges must be righteous and impartial, and they may not accept any form of bribery.

Idolatry, in all its forms, is forbidden and punishable by capital punishment. Sacrifices offered to God must be free of blemishes.

Jews are obligated to follow the rulings of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish Supreme Court. A sage with legal authority who publicly teaches against a decision of the Sanhedrin – as opposed to an ordinary citizen who simply disagrees – commits a capital offense.

The Torah establishes the laws of the Jewish king. The guiding principle for a Jewish king is that he must act with the awareness that God is the true King of Israel. The human king is subject to limitations, designed to keep him conscious of his true role. He must not accumulate horses – the symbol of military power – nor take many wives, nor amass great personal wealth. The king is required to write his own Sefer Torah, the constitution of the Jewish people, and to carry that copy with him at all times (as if, in today's terms, the president of a country were required to carry a copy of the National Constitution permanently in his pocket). This ensures that the monarch remains humble and constantly remembers that his primary duty is to observe the Torah and uphold God's Law throughout his domain.

God chooses the Cohanim to serve Him in His Sanctuary. "God is their inheritance," meaning that the Bet HaMiqdash will be "their territory" (their second home, as it were). Therefore their tribe, the Levites, will not receive a specific territory in the Land of Israel like the other tribes. How, then, will the Cohanim and the Levites support themselves? The

Priests and the descendants of the tribe of Levi would devote themselves to teaching Torah, and would be sustained by a series of contributions given to them by the people (in Hebrew, matenot kehuna: “priestly gifts”): certain portions of the meat of specific sacrifices, the teruma of the harvest, the first fruits of the land, a share of the shearing, and so on. The Levites, for their part, receive the people’s tithe.

The Torah strictly forbids divination, sorcery, magic, and the prediction of the future. Maimonides maintains that all these divination practices, such as astrology, are illusory – mere tricks and deceptions – since paranormal phenomena are fictitious, and often manipulated by charlatans to deceive and exploit ordinary people. In ancient times, these practices were deeply rooted in idolatry and pagan culture. The Torah instructs us to place our faith and trust in the Creator rather than trying to decipher the future.

We, the Jewish people, have the privilege of being guided by the Torah. God also sends us His prophets to convey His words, just as He did with Moshe. The prophets God sends have the mission of warning the people when they stray from the path of the Torah. Naturally, their words must be heeded. However, the Torah also warns about those who falsely claim to speak in God’s name. These false prophets do not warn the people about their wrongdoings. Instead, like skilled demagogues, they reassure the people and criticize the true prophets, accusing them of being alarmists and pessimists. A false prophet can be recognized when he advocates suspending or altering one of the Torah’s commandments.

The Torah underscores the obligation to establish cities of refuge for cases of unintentional homicide (a modern equivalent would be someone who kills another person accidentally, in a traffic accident). Moshe orders three additional cities to be set apart, joining the three he had already designated on the other side of the Jordan: six in total.

For a civil or criminal trial to result in a conviction, the testimony of at least two witnesses is required. Those who give false testimony receive the same punishment they sought for the accused.

Toward the end of the Parasha, the Torah describes some of the laws of war and the protocols of a military campaign. For example: who is exempt from military service? As the soldiers approach the battlefield, one of the Cohanim must address them, assuring them not to fear the enemy, since God supports the army of Israel in its conflicts. Then the officers announce who must return home: someone who has recently become engaged and is about to marry; someone who has built a new house and has not yet lived in it; someone who has planted a vineyard and has not yet enjoyed its fruits. The officers also advise anyone suffering from anxiety or panic to withdraw from the battlefield, so as not to demoralize the other soldiers. Before engaging the enemy, a peace proposal must be extended. Only if the enemy rejects this offer does the conflict begin. In the case of the Canaanite nations, the Torah commands that these populations be completely eradicated to prevent assimilation into pagan cultures; Maimonides clarifies, however, that they too were first offered peace: if they agreed to abandon idolatry and its practices, they were not attacked.

The Parasha concludes with a description of the legal procedure to be followed when a corpse is found in an open field and the perpetrator remains unidentified: the elders of the nearest city must publicly declare that they bear no responsibility for that death.