

“The Bible as Law”

With the breakdown of law and order in New Orleans, Louisiana, in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, and the opportunity for President Bush to nominate yet another justice to the United States Supreme Court, we will be very much focused on the role of law in society. This coming week, in congregations throughout the United States and the world, a portion of Deuteronomy will be read, which in Hebrew is called *Shoftim*, literally “judges.”

It has been the habit of the right-wing of the Republican party and Christian Evangelicals to quote the Bible as a format for today’s moral and governmental issues. Liberals who read the Bible will understand that it speaks to their issues as well. The argument can be made that the Bible expressly rejects any extreme point of view when it comes to the legal system. The *Sedrah* creates a constitutional monarch with specifically limited powers. Interestingly, monarchy was not commanded, like the appointment of judges, but permitted. The king was not allowed to have a large personal army, nor was he permitted to multiply wives to himself, he was not entitled to multiply to himself silver and gold, and he was to base all his actions upon the law and statutes. The reason? “That his heart be not lifted up above his brethren, and that he turn not aside from the commandment, to the **RIGHT HAND**, or to the **LEFT....**”

Commentators have argued that this constitutional monarch appointed by the prophet subject to the will of the people was not only obligated to base all his actions upon founded law, but even more importantly, he was not to be a leftist or a rightist! The Hebrew literally uses the term “left” and “right.” In creating order of civil government, Moses, speaking on behalf of the Deity, clearly understood the dangers of extreme points of view which undermined the confidence of the people.

The same chapter demands “righteous judgment,” that the law respect issues and not “persons,” and that judges be totally impartial. “Justice, justice shalt thou follow....” In Hebrew, the word for justice is the same as the root word for charity. No doubt the people of the Bible understood that clearly.

Shoftim created a court structure with the high court and demanded procedural due process. The laws related to crime and warfare in our day may seem quaint or even harsh, but the important point is that they were based upon preventing cruel excesses, and infusing law with a practical approach which would be acceptable to the governed. We live in a time when presidential power is defined by large armies, much personal fortune, and pleasures which at one time were provided for through the harem. We live in a time when due process is considered a disposable triviality and where justice is a concept to be sold, not a pious ideal to be emulated.

Recently, a special interest group began airing one word snippets of Justice Ginsburg’s confirmation hearing in which she refused to answer certain questions. Naturally, the ad did not say what the questions were. The announcer then told the public that Justice Roberts should be given the same kind of hearing as Justice Ginsburg was given. The ad struck one old-timer as being most irreverent. We are now selling Supreme Court justices the same way Madison Avenue public relations firms sell the latest detergent. We do not know from the ad the questions Justice Ginsburg was asked. We do not know the questions that Justice Roberts will be asked, but it certainly seems as though we are being asked to stray to the **RIGHT** or **LEFT** rather than staying on the moderate path intended by the Founders of this country.

Neither the right nor the left owns the Bible. The wisdom of the ages is there for all of us to debate and contemplate.