

When I was a kid, I had an interest in sports, but no particular athletic skills. Kids like me would sometimes become team managers, which meant managing the Gatorade, managing the towels, and keeping game statistics. It's a great way to be part of a team and stay close to the game. One fellow I knew had the ambition of becoming a trainer: part fitness expert, part doctor, part masseur, and pure fan. But I don't remember anyone who wanted to be an umpire or a referee when they grew up. Like managers and trainers, I imagine that refs were lovers of the game who opted for a non-playing role. But unlike team support personnel, referees never get the thrill of winning. No umpire will ever wear a World Series or Superbowl ring, and that's as it should be, because of all the qualities a referee or line judge or umpire must have: good eyesight, knowledge of the rulebook, a quick mind, thick skin, the most important part of being a ref is fairness. We don't want an ump to show favoritism, even for the home team. We want them to call them as they see them. Sometimes the best outcome is when both teams are equally upset with how the game was called.

It is literally a thankless job, but thank heaven someone is willing to do it. None of our professional sports would be possible without an impartial judge on the field keeping things square. Sure we get mad when they miss a call, but we hardly notice their routine accuracy. Instant replays point out when an official blew it, but far more often, they keep the game running smoothly.

Have you ever tried to compete without a ref? When we were kids, we had several ways to settle a disputed call. We could argue and fight. Or someone could take their ball and go home. Or we could resort to the instant replay, which for us meant Take it Over – back the game up and do the play again. Having a ref on hand would have sure saved us a lot of yelling. Instead of hollering at each other, we could all join in and gang up against the ref.

The problem is that perfect fairness is an impossible goal. Even in the age of instant replay and high speed video, it is still sometimes hard to tell if a ball landed on the line, or if a tag beat a touch, or if a hand hooked a helmet. So pity the poor umpire. They strive for a standard of fairness they can never achieve, and earn the wrath of fans everywhere who have little sympathy for how hard it really is.

If there's any consolation for a referee, it may be found in this week's Torah portion. In the first paragraph of Shoftim, we are told: tzedek tzedek tirdof – justice, justice, you shall pursue. We are to pursue justice, not casually follow it. We are to keep trying to get closer to justice, though we'll never completely get there. It's as if the Torah realizes that in every judgment call, there's a chance we will fall short. We rightly locked up Squeaky Fromme for decades, but now she is free again. Brilliant police work identified and imprisoned the Lockerbie bomber, yet now he has been released. Tough calls – challenging calls - controversial calls, but thank heaven someone was in place who could be trusted to make those calls. For worse than any possible misapplication of justice is the absence of justice, when the mob decides or when a few thugs intimidate us into letting their will prevail. A respected judicial system is one of the foundations of a healthy society, and that is why we are so rightly concerned when judges are assassinated or when US attorneys are fired. Without an even handed referee, even a fallible one, there can be no fairness for any of us.

Thus our Torah portion begins with the words Shoftim v'shotrim titein l'cha: Appoint judges and officials for yourself. For us. For our sake. Not prophets who claim to know the will of God, nor priests with a stubborn devotion to the rules, but human judges with human limitations who can bring a humane judgment to the crazy situations we humans get ourselves into. They won't always get it right, which is why our Torah portion even describes an appeals process, where we can turn if a decision is beyond our local judge's ability. Built into the Torah's teachings is an assumption that we must work things out for ourselves. Just like kids in a pick up game in somebody's backyard, we are on our own to decide the hard calls as best we can. Sure, there will always be a gap between our ideals of fairness and what we actually attain, but look how much we have attained! God has certainly graced us with the ability to make moral distinctions, and the awareness that fairness for all serves us better than any temporary partiality. Whether we appoint them, elect them, or simply hire them, the judges, umpires and referees who make our athletic contests and our political system work are deserving of our respect. Their willingness to step into the arena, in full view and at the mercy of the general public, is a gift to us all. By upholding their dignity, we ensure that the best and the brightest of the next generation will become managers, trainers, and yes, umpires and referees, too.