One People, Many Voices: Justice, Pluralism, and the Urgency of Equity

Devorim

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1. Introduction: How Is It Possible to Speak to Everyone at Once?

How is it possible to speak to everyone at once—and for each person to hear and connect with the same premise simultaneously?

This week's Torah portion, Parashat Devarim, begins with what seems like an impossible feat:

> "These are the words which Moses spoke to all Israel..." (Deut. 1:1)

The Kli Yakar is puzzled. Nowhere else do we find Moses addressing all of Israel in a single moment—how can one man, one voice, reach sixty myriad souls at once? And yet, this verse, like the one in Parashat Vayelech describing Hakhel, insists that he did. This is not just logistical—it is spiritual. The Torah here is telling us that despite fragmentation, despite factions, there is a moment when all of Israel must hear the same truth.

As the Gemara in Berakhot 32a:7 notes, Moses' phrase "Di Zahav" is not a location but a metaphor—his sacred, gentle rebuke for the sin of the Golden Calf. Even his critique was coded in symbolism, so each soul could hear it according to their level.

So too, let us begin with a parable for our time:

> There was once a boy who entered the sanctuary with trust. He believed the holy place was safe — built on Torah, lit with Shabbat candles, echoing with the songs of his people.

> But over time, he noticed something strange.

> The menorah still burned, but behind it, shadows moved — shadows that whispered rather than prayed.

> He watched as the leaders dipped their hands — not into oil of anointing, but into the cookie jar meant for the hungry, the stranger, the orphan, and the widowed. He saw them stretch their arms — not to bless, but to grope, to dominate, to shame.

> The boy cried out. Not once, but many times.

> But the sanctuary walls were thick with insulation. The cries echoed only inside his chest.

> And when he found the courage to speak, he was told:

> "Shhh. Lashon hara. Loshon hora. You mustn't desecrate the community."

> As if he was the one desecrating it. As if truth was more dangerous than what had been done to him.

Like Moses' rebuke, truth today must sometimes be wrapped in metaphor for it to be heard. But let us not mistake poetry for silence. There is urgency here. A justice cry that echoes across time.

2. A Pluralistic Covenant: Sacred Asymmetry

Our people are not one stream but many. From Chabad, Lubavitch, Toras Baal Shem Tov, Aish, JLE, and the Orthodox Union, to the United Synagogue, the Federation, and the Addath Yisroel, and extending into the Reform, Masorti (British and Israeli), Conservative, Liberal, Progressive, and unaffiliated Jewish voices—the spectrum is vast.

The Kedushas Levi (on Parashat Devarim) teaches that Moses' speech to "all of Israel" signals a unification of diverse souls—a message that even rebuke must reach each individual according to their spiritual root. The Noam Elimelech similarly writes that the righteous must elevate each soul in its unique way, noting that plurality in divine service is not only acceptable but necessary for the full expression of God's will.

This sacred asymmetry is not weakness. It is our ethical infrastructure. It prevents domination, upholds diversity, and reflects the divine image more fully.

However, as the Midrash in Devarim Rabbah 1:1 and the Gemara in Megillah 8b clarify, there are limits to pluralism. Torah scrolls may be translated into Greek—a language esteemed by the sages—but tefillin, mezuzot, and Sefer Torah must remain in the original Hebrew script. These textual boundaries are not exclusionary; they are protective. Halacha sets borders where sanctity and security must be preserved.

Pluralism with integrity is justice. Pluralism without limits can become chaos.

3. Torah and Law: Justice Seen and Justice Done

The law, like the Torah, requires both fairness and the appearance of fairness. As Lord Hewart famously ruled in R v Sussex Justices, ex parte McCarthy [1924] 1 KB 256: "Justice must not only be done but must also be seen to be done."

In defamation law, this principle comes alive. As Lord Hailsham ruled in Cassell & Co Ltd v Broome [1972] AC 1027, a claimant is entitled to damages that "vindicate his reputation." In Monroe v Hopkins [2017] EWHC 433 (QB), the damages awarded were less about financial harm and more about restoring public truth.

Justice must be public. It must be transparent. It must be visible. And the Bar Standards Board's Core Duties echo this principle:

Core Duty 1: Uphold the rule of law and proper administration of justice

Core Duty 2: Act with integrity

Core Duty 3: Maintain independence

Core Duty 5: Promote public confidence in legal proceedings

These duties do not rest on judges and barristers alone—they reflect a societal covenant with accountability.

4. The Cry for Integrity

"We have to be just. We have to be just. We have to be just. We have to be just."

This phrase is not merely poetic—it is halakhic and civic imperative. As echoed in Berakhot 32a, Moses challenges God with sacred defiance because justice demands clarity, not comfort. Likewise, in Sanhedrin 7a, the judge is warned: "Whoever delays judgment is like one who destroys the world." Justice, delayed or denied, fractures creation itself.

The repetition reflects the call of Devarim 16:20, "Tzedek, tzedek tirdof." Rashi explains this doubled command as an exhortation to pursue justice by just means, underscoring that both process and outcome matter. It's also a warning that there will be resistance, that repetition is required to pierce deaf ears and hardened hearts.

This is not repetition. It is resistance. It is liturgy. A protest of the soul.

5. Justice in Narrative and Nation

The Netflix series Adolescence functions as a contemporary midrash on vulnerability, trauma, and institutional betrayal. The protagonist, like the boy in our sanctuary, is

subjected to abuse, silencing, and spiritual erosion. His experience—articulated through modern narrative—calls us to reflect on how society responds to the cry of the marginalised. The story is fiction, but it is true in the deepest sense.

This character's struggle echoes the ethical urgency found in our sacred texts: a demand that those in power must listen, must act, and must do so visibly.

This theme is not restricted to drama or metaphor. It plays out on the global stage.

When the British Government recently moved to recognise the State of Palestine, it did so in a gesture that is politically complex, ethically weighty, and symbolically potent. While the aim may be peace and parity, the timing and method of such recognition must be scrutinised under the lens of Torah and halakhic ethics.

The Torah commands, "Lo takir panim"—do not show partiality in judgment. This means that even gestures of justice must be made with full awareness of the wider impact. Recognition that advances peace and dignity is sacred; recognition that ignores security and asymmetry risks perverting justice in pursuit of optics.

Our political gestures must echo what the law demands in defamation: public truth, clarity, and responsibility. Recognition must be accompanied by responsibility. Narrative must meet nuance. And justice—whether for a boy in a sanctuary or a nation on the margins—must be pursued with eyes wide open and scales balanced.

6. Conclusion: The Sanctuary Revisited

Let us return to the boy. He still stands in the sanctuary. The menorah still burns. But his voice, like Moses' voice, must no longer be coded in whispers.

We must not silence him with misplaced fears of lashon hara. We must not shame him for exposing shame.

If we are to say "All Israel" with integrity, then justice for the boy — and all the boys and girls like him — must not only be done, it must be seen to be done.

"Tzedek, tzedek tirdof — Justice, justice you shall pursue" (Deut. 16:20).

Justice twice: once for what is right, once for what is revealed.

For the sanctuary to be holy again, it must echo with truth.

And those who hold power — in rabbinic office, political leadership, media, or the courts — must balance the scales with haste.

Because the boy still waits. Because the adolescent on the screen echoes his cry. Because the nations of the world look for moral clarity. Because the menorah still burns.

And maybe—just maybe—this is how we all hear the same truth at once.