

NJPS the people before God: you bring the disputes before God, ²⁰and enjoin upon them the laws and the teachings, and make known to them the way they are to go and the practices they are to follow. ²¹You shall also seek out from among all the people **capable men** who fear God, trustworthy men who spurn ill-gotten gain. Set these over them as chiefs of thousands, hundreds, fifties,

OJPS people before God, and bring thou the causes unto God. ²⁰And thou shalt teach them the statutes and the laws, and shalt show them the way wherein they must walk, and the work that they must do. ²¹Moreover thou shalt provide out of all the people **able men**, such as fear God, men of truth, hating unjust gain; and place such over them, to be rulers of thousands, rulers of hundreds,

הייה אתה לעם מול האלהים והבאת אתה את ההקדים אל-האלהים: 20 והוזהרתה אתהם את-החקים ואת-התורות והודעת להם את-הדרך ילכו ביה ואת-המעשה אשר יעשון: 21 ואתה תחווה מפל-העם אנשי-חיל יראי אלהים אנשי אמת שנאי בצע ושמת עליהם שרי אלפים שרי מאות שרי

RASHI should represent them before God, and inquire of Him about the rules of justice. **The disputes.** The translation is correct. [H]

21 You shall also seek out. Literally, "you shall envision"—through the Holy Spirit that is upon you. **Capable men.** Rather, "rich" men, who are under no pressure to flatter or show favoritism to anyone. **Trustworthy men.** Whose word is reliable, and who will therefore be listened to. **Who spurn ill-gotten gain.** Those who despise their own wealth if taken to court. [I] As it says at B. BB 58b, "A judge who must be hauled into court to pay money he owes to a [H] Contrast the view of Nahmanides. [I] This expression seems to mean that they are absolutely indifferent even to their own possessions.

ABARBANEL'S QUESTIONS † Since up to that time Moses had been able to judge the whole people, why were chiefs (v. 21) of anything smaller than 1,000 necessary—let alone chiefs of 10? † Why did Jethro not suggest that "wise" men be appointed?

RASHBAM is necessary to inquire of God, you will hear what the Holy One tells you, and **enjoin it upon them.** This corresponds to "Have them bring every major dispute to you" of v. 22. But the other cases, which are easily understood by the wise men of Israel whom you will appoint for them—"let them decide every minor dispute themselves. Make it easier for yourself" (v. 22).

21 Capable men. The Hebrew word implies that they are men of both wealth and might, who will fear no one. **Who spurn ill-gotten gain.** The word translated

NAHMANIDES God," in the Tent of Meeting, ready to inquire of Him. Do not do this in the same place where you sit in judgment.

20 The way they are to go. According to the Teaching and the Commandment that you instruct them and enjoin upon them. Again, Jethro concedes that it is Moses' job to "make known the laws and teachings of God" (v. 16), and adds his advice to "warn" the people (the literal meaning of the word translated "enjoin") strictly about the commandments and the punishments for violating them, since he will no longer be judging them in person. But as far as deciding "between one person and another" (v. 16), you must associate other judges with you, for "the task is too heavy for you" (v. 17). It will be better for both you and them if others bear this burden with you. It is well known that Moses already had officials serving as court officers (they are mentioned in Deut. 1:15), e.g., to bring to court those who were summoned; many of them were among the judges appointed here. But there was no need to mention them here, since this was not part of Jethro's advice.

IBN EZRA in OJPS) has him on the people's side. **The disputes.** If they are difficult ones, as Jethro explains in v. 22.

20 Enjoin upon them. Literally, "warn them," with the meaning here of "make sure they take care to observe." (This corresponds to what Moses said in v. 16 about making God's teachings known.) See Ezek. 3:21, where the man who is "warned" not to sin "takes warning," that is, takes care. "Them" is an unusual compound word. **The laws and teachings.** Those about which there is some question. For it is a huge task to teach them *all* "the practices they are to follow." Moses is to teach them the commandments that involve the heart, for they are the essence of Torah: to love God and cleave to Him; to fear Him and to follow Him; to circumcise the foreskin of the heart; not to hate one's brother, take vengeance, or bear a grudge. As Moses says, "the thing is very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart, to observe it" (Deut. 30:14). There are many such. **The practices they are to follow.** This refers primarily to the ritual commandments, for most of which the ritual action invokes some other value; I will explain each one in its place.

21 Capable men. Literally, "men of force," capable of managing such a large force of people. The word is not used only of military forces. It is applied to the "vast multitude" of the revived dry bones in Ezek. 37:10 and the "army" of locusts let loose in Joel 2:25. The word is also applied to multitudes of wealth (Deut. 8:17 and Isa. 30:6) and of fruit (Joel 2:22). In matters of justice, the "capable" man is one who is wise, energetic, and honest, just as the capable warrior is energetic and knowledgeable about military formations and the capable wife (Prov. 12:4, 31:10) is energetic and knowledgeable about running a household. Jethro meant "capable" as a general designation, which the subsequent phrases specify. Others understand it to mean "energetic, powerful men," an interpretation that is also supported by many biblical verses. **Who fear God, trustworthy men who spurn ill-gotten gain.** One cannot really be capable of establishing justice without

21 I have already explained that Hebrew writers preserve meanings, not exact words; so we shall not contrast the differences between corresponding passages. [C] **Capable men.** The reference is to their physical ability to stand up to the task; the word is used this way in Hab. 3:19, "My Lord GOD is my strength." **Who fear God.** So they will not acquire a bad reputation. **Trustworthy men.** Literally, "men of truth" (OJPS), who do not lie. **Who spurn ill-gotten gain.** Money. The point is that they will not accept bribes. **Chiefs of thousands,** etc. Some make their total out to be 1,160; others, 678; still others, 11,110. I do not want to take the time to go over the calculations, for a careful reading of the text contradicts them. The truth is what the ancients said—the grand total of chiefs [C] Ibn Ezra goes on to show that all the qualities of judges recommended by Jethro match the "men who are wise, discerning, and experienced" of Deut. 1:13, where Moses retells this story.

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS **20 The laws and the teachings.** The "laws" are those things which it is decreed that one must do, whether by commandment or by custom, and the "teachings" are the instructions about how to perform the commandments (Kimhi). These are the negative commandments, which cannot be known except by prophecy (Gersonides).

21 Seek out from among all the people. By means of prophecy (Gersonides). **Capable men who fear God.** Capable men tend to be grasping; hence only those who also feared God were suitable to serve as judges (Abarbanel). **Who spurn ill-gotten gain.** As our Sages said of Prov. 29:4, "By justice a king sustains the land, but one who exacts gifts overthrows it": If the judge is like a king, who needs