

Parashat Bamidbar 5772, 2012:

Achieving Hashem's Kindness and Mercy

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra, my sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, and Shifra bat Chaim Alter, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam, Yehonatan Binyamin Halevy ben Golda Friedel, and Moshe Reuven ben Chaya.

Our *parasha's* Haftorah reading is *Sefer Hosea 2:1-2:22*. The final two *pasukim* (verses) of this passage are well known to men since they are recited after donning the Tefillin: "And I will betroth you to Me forever, and I will betroth you to Me with righteousness and with justice and with loving-kindness and with mercy. And I will betroth you to Me with faith, and you shall know the L-rd." (Translation, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*) Rashi (1040-1105) explains that "with righteousness and with justice" refers to what we do, i.e. our pragmatic practice of these ethical characteristics (*midot tovo*), whereas "and with loving-kindness and with mercy," refers to Hashem's response to their practice. Rashi buttresses this exegesis with the following textual supports:

Concerning our father Abraham, it is written (Gen 18:19): "For I have known him because he commands his sons and his household after him, that they should keep the way of the L-rd to perform righteousness and justice, in order that the L-rd bring upon Abraham that which He spoke concerning him." And, corresponding to them, He bestowed upon his children loving-kindness and mercy, as it is said (Deut. 13:18): "And He shall grant you mercy;" (ibid. 7:12) "And the L-rd your G-d shall keep for you the covenant and the loving-kindness." When they ceased to perform righteousness and justice, as it is said (Amos 5:7): "Those who turn justice into wormwood, and righteousness they leave on the ground," also the Holy One, blessed be He, took away from them the loving-kindness and the mercy, as it is said (Jer. 16:5): "for I have gathered in My peace from this people, says the L-rd, the loving-kindness and the mercies." And when they will return to perform righteousness and justice, they shall be redeemed immediately, as it is said (Isa. 1: 27): "Zion shall be redeemed through justice, and her penitent through righteousness." And the Holy One, blessed be He, will add mercy and loving-kindness to them and make a crown of all four of them and place it on their head. (Ibid.)

Allow me to summarize both *Sefer Hosea 2:21* and the essential points of Rashi's analysis:

1. *Sefer Hosea 2: 21* contains four separate terms that form the underpinning of the covenantal agreement that obtains between the Jewish people and Hashem: *Tzedek* (Righteousness), *Mishpat* (Justice), *Chesed* (Loving-Kindness), and *Rachamim* (Mercy).

2. *Tzedek* and *mishpat* are our responsibilities. They reflect the manner in which we must comport ourselves with our fellow man. All of our actions need to be invested with elements of righteousness and justice if we are to lay proper claim to the title of being *b'nai Avraham, Yitzchak, Yaakov, Sarah, Rivka, Rachel, and Leah* (the children of the Patriarchs and Matriarchs).
3. *Chesed* and *rachamim* are from Hashem, and reflect His Divine response to our actions that embody *tzedek* and *mishpat*.
4. A *quid pro quo* (*middah k'neged middah*) relationship obtains between our acts of righteousness and justice, and Hashem's subsequent bestowal of His beneficence upon us, reflected in His acts of loving-kindness and mercy. As Rashi explicitly notes: When we fail to live up to our responsibilities toward our fellow man and act without righteousness and justice, then Hashem, in turn, will act toward us, G-d forbid, without *chesed* and *rachamim*. In contrast, when we live up to our covenantal mandate to be truly human and pursue the authentically ethical gesture, then Hashem will reward us in kind.

Based upon the above analysis, it is evident that we have a relationship with Hashem that, in some ways, mirrors the relationships that we share with family and friends. Our relationship with Hashem is based upon clearly delineated rights and responsibilities, as outlined in the Torah. Similarly, our relationships with family and friends are defined by a host of social and cultural mores and expectations, and by the love and respect we share for, and with, one another. Most of us realize that we cannot, and must not, take our family and friendships for granted. We know that these relationships take work and effort to keep them vibrant, dynamic, and truly beautiful. Some of us, however, do not realize that the same is true regarding our relationship with Hashem. To counteract this lapse of recognition, we must constantly work in order to authentically encounter our Creator.

The prophet Hosea gives us a formula for success in achieving a relationship with Hashem that pulsates with boundless spiritual energy. He tells us that if we want to experience the unlimited joy of Hashem's *chesed* and *rachamim*, we must treat our fellow man with righteousness and justice. Every action we undertake must be viewed through the lens of discernment of a seemingly simple question: "Does this act bring greater righteousness and justice to the world, or does it bring the opposite in its wake?" May we be *zocheh* (merit) to pursue *tzedek* and *mishpat* in all of our actions. May we then be *zocheh*, as well, to receive the wonderful blessings of Hashem's *chesed* and *rachamim*. *V'chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom

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My audio *shiurim* on *Tefilah and Haskafah* may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/7sp5vt3>

*** I have recently posted 164 of **Rabbi Soloveitchik's** English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. They are available here: <http://tinyurl.com/82pgvfn>.

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