

Parashat Re'eh, 5771, 2011:

Pursuing Good and Righteous Actions

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Dedicated to the sacred memory of my sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam and Sheva bat Sarah Rivka.

Our *parasha* contains a *pasuk* (verse) that in some ways effectively summarizes a life dedicated to the service of Hashem: “Keep and hearken to all these words that I command you, that it may benefit you and your children after you, forever, when you do what is good and proper in the eyes of the L-rd, your G-d.” (*Sefer Devarim* 12:28, this and all Bible translations, *The Judaic Press Complete Tanach*) Herein we are promised that everlasting benefits will accrue for one who does that which is “is good and proper in the eyes of the L-rd, your G-d.” A careful reading of this verse immediately spotlights two words: “good” and “proper” – “*tov*” and “*yashar*” - respectively in the original Hebrew. A fundamental principle of Biblical exegesis is the concept of verbal non-redundancy. In our case, this means that since the Creator utilized two terms, they must, by definition, connote two different meanings. Such an approach to our verse is found in the *Sifrei*, the halachic Midrash to *Sefer Devarim*:

“... when you do what is good and proper in the eyes of the L-rd, your G-d.” Rabbi Akiva interpreted this phrase in this manner: The “good” in the eyes of Heaven, and that which is “proper” in the eyes of man. So, too, do we find [in *Sefer Mishle* 3:4]: “And find favor and good (*tov*) understanding in the sight of G-d and man.” Rabbi Yishmael said: “That which is “proper” (“*yashar*”) in the eyes of Heaven, and the “good” in the eyes of man.” (Translation and underlining my own)

Fascinatingly, Rabbis Akiva and Yishmael interpret “*tov*” and “*yashar*” in an opposite manner: Rabbi Akiva states that “*tov*” refers to “the eyes of Heaven,” whereas “*yashar*”

refers to the “eyes of man.” In contrast, Rabbi Yishmael opines that “*tov*” refers to the “eyes of man,” and “*yashar*” refers to the “eyes of Heaven.”

Rabbi Yishmael’s interpretation appears to be the more compelling of the two approaches, since cognate Biblical texts employing the term “*yashar*” always refer to G-d (“in the eyes of Heaven”). As such, the explicit referent for our term in *Sefer Devarim* 12:24, 13:19, and 21:8, is “in the eyes of G-d.” If so, why did Rabbi Akiva interpret “*yashar*” as referring to man, and “*tov*” as referring to G-d? The mystery deepens when we realize that Rashi (1040-1105) followed Rabbi Akiva’s approach, as well, in his commentary on our verse.

I believe that Rabbi Meir Leibush ben Yechiel Michel (1809-1879), known as “the Malbim” after the initials of his Hebrew name, provides us with a window of opportunity for understanding the conceptual cogency of Rabbi Akiva’s approach:

“*Tov*” is exceedingly relevant regarding commandments between man and G-d since we do not perform them based upon their perceived righteousness, rather, we fulfill them because of the Divine Wisdom (*hachamah haeloyonah*). Moreover, it is well known that good and evil are aspects of Divine Wisdom since all matters thereof are either good or evil. In addition, man is incapable of ascertaining on his own what is good and what is evil – this can only be done through the study of Divine Wisdom and Hashem’s Torah... In contrast, commandments between man and his fellow man, whose propriety are manifestly evident to one and all – rightfully deserve the appellation of “*yashar*,” since man is capable of apprehending them through his own intellectual gifts. (Translation my own)

Herein, the Malbim provides us with a solid analysis of Rabbi Akiva’s understanding of “*tov*” and “*yashar*.” In short, “*tov*” refers to matters of G-d’s Divine Wisdom, whereas “*yashar*” refers to humanly perceivable ethical actions.

I believe there is another powerful support for understanding “*tov*” as referencing Divine Wisdom, namely, the famous words of Michah the prophet, as found in chapter 6 verse 8 of his work: “He has told you, O man, what is good (*tov*), and what the L-rd demands of you; but to do justice, to love loving-kindness, and to walk humbly with your G-d.” Clearly, G-d, and G-d alone, is He who determines that which is truly good.

May it be G-d’s will that each of us will try to pursue that which is *tov* and *yashar* in His eyes and in those of our fellow man. With Michah’s words as our guide, may we strive to do justice, perform acts of loving-kindness, and ever walk humbly with the Master of the Universe. *V’chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom

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<http://reparashathashavuah.weebly.com/>

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