

Parashat Shoftim 5772, 2012

Pursuing Truth in Our Lives

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, 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.

The beginning phrase of the third verse of this week's *parasha* is a very famous one: "*Tzedek tzedek tirdof...*" "Justice justice you shall pursue...." (*Sefer Devarim* 16:20) The context of this statement is very clear. It is an earnest appeal to Jewish judges to pursue justice in all of their rulings. The reward for their doing so is equally clear: "*l'maan tichyeh v'yarashta et haaretz asher Hashem Elokecha notane lach*" "in order that you shall live and inherit the land that the L-rd your G-d has given you." What, however, does the Torah mean when it tells the judges (and, by extension, all Jews) to pursue justice? Stated somewhat differently, what is the content of the term *tzedek*? What does it connote from the Torah's vantage point?

When we think of justice as a concept, we are likely to understand it in some of the following ways:

the quality of being just; righteousness, equitableness, or moral rightness: to uphold the justice of a cause, rightfulness or lawfulness, as of a claim or title; justness of ground or reason: to complain with justice, the moral principle determining just conduct, conformity to this principle, as manifested in conduct; just conduct, dealing, or treatment (www.dictionary.com)

Is this, however, how Judaism understands this term, or might it really mean something else?

I believe that we can find a meaningful answer to the question “What is justice (*tzedek*) within Jewish thought?” by carefully examining the way in which Onkelos translates the term in his classic second century Aramaic translation. This work is known as *Targum Onkelos* and is often simply referred to as “the *Targum*.” Its significance cannot be overestimated, since virtually all classic *meforshim* (Torah commentators) consistently refer to his work in their quest for a deeper understanding of the Torah and its authentic meaning.

When we examine nearly every instance in the Torah wherein *tzedek* is used as a noun, such as in our verse, or as an adjective (e.g. *Sefer Devarim* 25: 13-15), we discover that Onkelos translates our term as “*kushtah*” when used as a noun, and as “*k’shut*” when used as an adjective. “*Kushtah*” means, “truth,” and “*k’shut*” means, “truthful,” in the sense of honest or accurate. What emerges from this translation is Onkelos’ penetrating insight into the nature and quality of Jewish justice and Jewish life. When judges are urged to pursue justice and, by extension, when we are forced to make morally charged decisions amid the challenges of daily life, we now know one thing quite clearly: the Torah expects us to pursue **truth**. Therefore, “Justice, justice you shall pursue,” in Onkelos’ view, really means “Truth, truth you shall pursue.” When viewed in this manner, “*Tzedek tzedek tirdof...*” ceases to be the province of a few, and becomes, instead, the obligation of us all.

On the practical level, however, we know that it is difficult to pursue the often-fleeting ideal of truth. At the end of the recitation of the *Shema*, we say: “*Hashem Elokechem emet*” (“Hashem, your G-d, **is** truth”). Sadly, we cannot say this regarding our fellow

man, i.e. “Man is truth,” since experience teaches us that this is simply not the case. Indeed, *Dovid Hamelech* (King David) taught us this essential lesson in the well-known *pasuk* (verse): “*Al tivtichu b’nedivim b’ben adam sheain lo teshuah*” (“Do not trust in princes nor in human beings who offer no help,” *Sefer Tehilim* 146:3). Enwrapped in the web of desires and ambitions, people are often far too ready to sacrifice truth for the pursuit of momentary pleasures and perceived needs. Sadly, they create walls of indifference that prevent them from pursuing *tzedek* and honest relationships with others.

Last week we celebrated the onset of Rosh Chodesh Elul, and left behind the pain imprinted on our spiritual psyche that the month of Av so poignantly represents. Av represents distance from Hashem. In stark contrast, Elul represents closeness to Hashem, and the rebirth of the love relationship that obtains between our Creator and ourselves. We are once again preparing for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, for the Days of Awe. We will once again stand before Hashem and beseech Him for our lives, our livelihood, and the health and happiness of our families, friends, and the entire Jewish people. What, however, are we “bringing to the table” in this plea-filled prayer dialogue? True, we all have *brit avot* (the covenant of the Avot, Avraham, Yitzhak, and Yaakov) to protect us, yet what are **we**, on our own, presenting to Hashem as a reason why He should listen to our heart-felt entreaties?

This year, during the Days of Awe, I would like to respectfully suggest that we go before Hashem with a new agenda. This year, let us go before Hashem and declare that, to the best of our limited abilities, we will try to overcome the obstacles that prevent us from communicating honestly with our family, friends, and, most importantly, with our

Creator. May this year be the year that we fulfill the *pasuk* of “*Tzedek tzedek tirdof*,” so that we can build our relationships anew and in truth. With Hashem’s help, may this be a year of *tzedek* for us all. *V’chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom

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The email list, *b’chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added, please do not hesitate to contact me via email rdbe718@gmail.com.

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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