

Parashat Shoftim 5775, 2015

Justice, Justice Shall You Pursue

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 bat Yechiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chaim Mordechai Hakohen ben Natan Yitzchak, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Avraham Yechezkel ben Yaakov Halevy, HaRav Yosef Shemuel ben HaRav Reuven Aharon, the *refuah shlaimah* of Devorah bat Chana, and Yitzhak Akiva ben Malka, and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

Justice (*tzedek*), justice shall you pursue, that you may live and possess the land the L-rd, your G-d, is giving you. (*Sefer Devarim* 16:20, this and all Bible and Rashi translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

The beginning of our *pasuk* (verse), “Justice, justice shall you pursue,” is one of the best-known phrases in the Torah. Indeed, for many, Judaism’s concept of *tzedek* (justice) is one of its greatest contributions to the world at large. Associate Supreme Court Justice, Ruth Bader Ginsburg, gave voice to this perception in her speech on Holocaust Memorial Day, April 22, 2004:

My heritage as a Jew and my occupation as a judge fit together symmetrically. The demand for justice runs through the entirety of Jewish history and Jewish tradition. I take pride in and draw strength from my heritage, as signs in my chambers attest: a large silver mezuzah on my door post, ... on three walls, in artists’ renditions of Hebrew letters, the command from Deuteronomy: “*Tzedek, tzedek, tirdof*” — “Justice, justice shall you pursue.” Those words are ever-present reminders of what judges must do that they “may thrive.” (<http://www.ushmm.org/remember/days-of-remembrance/past-days-of-remembrance/2004-days-of-remembrance/ruth-bader-ginsburg>)

“Justice,” however, is an elusive term and concept that is often used as a rallying cry, rather than as a precise expression that connotes specific meaning. As such, let us turn to some of the great thinkers of our tradition in order to understand some of the ways that justice may be understood within the Torah’s purview.

Onkelos, who lived in Israel during the first century CE, is most famous for his Aramaic translation and interpretation of the Torah. He translates the first three words of our *pasuk* (verse) as: “*Kushta kushta hevai radif*” (“Truth, truth you shall pursue.”) Clearly, for this Torah sage, justice is inextricably interwoven with truth – to the point that they are well-nigh inseparable and serve as synonyms for one another. Onkelos’ approach finds marked parallels in two verses found in *Sefer Tehillim* wherein “justice” and “truth” appear in close proximity to one another:

He who walks uprightly and works justice (*tzedek*), and speaks truth (*emet*) in his heart.
(15:2)

And your glory is that you will pass and ride for the sake of truth (*emet*) and just (*tzedek*) humility, and it shall instruct you so that your right hand shall perform awesome things.
(45:5 with my emendations)

The great Spanish exegete, Rabbeinu Bahya ben Asher ibn Halawa, known as Rabbeinu Behaye (1340 – 1255), in his direct-level exegesis (*peshat*) of our *pasuk* focuses upon the application of *tzedek* in both our words and deeds. In doing so, he explains the repetition of “*tzedek*” in our phrase in a highly original manner:

One must be particularly careful to infuse both his actions and words with justice; for it is precisely these matters wherein it is possible for a person to harm himself and others. Therefore, the verse states “*tzedek*” twice – once to refer to him and once to refer to others. All those who imbue their words with justice, reveal signs and demonstrations regarding the justness of their actions [since words and the ideas inherent in them most often serve as causal forces regarding actual behaviors]. Therefore it is fitting and proper for each and every person among the Jewish people to ensure that their words and actions are permeated with justice. As the text states: “The remnant of Israel shall neither commit injustice nor speak lies; neither shall deceitful speech be found in their mouth, for they shall graze and lie down, with no one to cause them to shudder.” (*Sefer Tzephaniah* 3:13, Rabbeinu Behaye - translation, underlining and brackets my own)

Similarly, the brilliant 19th German-Jewish theologian, Rabbeinu Shimshon Raphael Hirsch (1808-1888), viewed our verse as shaping the behavior of the entire Jewish people, both on the individual as well as the national level:

Justice should be the highest and singular goal of the entire nation. Moreover, one ought to aspire for justice in and of itself. All other considerations must be subordinated to achieve this purpose. Justice is that which shapes all connections and attachments of the individual and the community in order to conform to the requirements of Hashem's Torah. The role of a Jewish individual is to pursue that which is just in an unceasing manner – with complete dedication. (Translation and underlining my own from the Hebrew edition of the original German text)

With Hashem's help and blessing, may we, both as a nation and as individuals, succeed in dedicating ourselves to become the living embodiment of “*Tzedek tzedek tirdof.*”
V'chane yihi ratzon.

Shabbat Shalom

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*** My audio *shiurim* for Women on “*Tefilah: Haskafah and Analysis*,” may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpyd>

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