

Parashat Re'eh, 5781, 2021:

To Do What is Tov v'Yashar

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechiel, Chana bat Shmuel, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Shoshana Elka bat Avraham, Tikvah bat Rivka Perel, Peretz ben Chaim, Chaya Sarah bat Reb Yechezkel Shraga, Shmuel Yosef ben Reuven, Shayndel bat Mordechai Yehudah, the *Kedoshim* of Har Nof, Pittsburgh, and Jersey City, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Mordechai HaLevi ben Miriam Tovah, Moshe ben Itta Golda, Yocheved Dafneh bat Dinah Zehavah, Reuven Shmuel ben Leah, and the health and safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

Our *parasha* contains a *pasuk* that summarizes the nature of a life dedicated to serving 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 (*tov*) and proper (*yashar*) in the eyes of the L-rd, your G-d.” (*Sefer Devarim* 12:28, this and all Bible translations, *The Judaic Press Complete Tanach*) A straightforward reading of this *pasuk* spotlights two words, *tov* and *yashar*. A fundamental principle of Torah exegesis is the concept of verbal non-redundancy. Therefore, since the Torah utilizes two different terms, they must definitionally connote two distinct meanings. We find this approach 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 (*tov*) in the eyes of Heaven, and that which is proper (*yashar*) in the eyes of man... Rabbi Yishmael said: “That which is proper (*yashar*) in the eyes of Heaven, and the good (*tov*) in the eyes of man.” (Translation and underlining my own)

Intriguingly, Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Yishmael take polar opposite positions: 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 initially appears to be the more compelling, since cognate Biblical texts that employ the term "*yashar*" most often refer to the Almighty ("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 Hashem?

I believe that the Malbim (Rabbi Meir Leibush ben Yechiel Michel, 1809-1879) provides a convincing case for the conceptual cogency of Rabbi Akiva's analysis:

Tov is exceedingly relevant regarding commandments between man and Hashem, as we do not perform them based upon their perceived righteousness, rather, we fulfill them because of the Divine Wisdom (*chachmah haeloyonah*)... In addition, man is incapable of ascertaining on his own what is good and what is evil, as 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 can apprehend them through his own intellectual gifts. (Translation my own)

The Malbim provides us with a solid assessment of Rabbi Akiva's understanding of *tov* and *yashar*: *Tov* refers to matters of G-d's Divine Wisdom, whereas *yashar* is based upon humanly perceivable moral actions.

In my estimation, Michah the prophet offers further proof for understanding *tov* as Divine Wisdom: "He has told you, O man, what is good (*tov*), and what the L-rd demands of you; but to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your G-d." (*Sefer Michah* 6:8) In Michah's view, Hashem alone is He who determines that which is authentically good.

May each of us seek to do that which is *tov* and *yashar* in Hashem's eyes, and in those of our fellow man. With Michah's stirring words as our guiding light, may we strive to act with justice and loving-kindness, and walk ever humbly with our Creator. *V'chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom and may Hashem in His infinite mercy remove the pandemic from *klal Yisrael* and all the nations of the world.

Past *drashot* may be found at my blog-website: <http://reparashathashavuah.org>

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 <mailto:rdbe718@gmail.com>.

*** My audio *shiurim* on the topics of *Tefilah* and *Tanach* may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpvd>

*** I have posted 164 of Rabbi Soloveitchik's English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. Please click on the highlighted link: [The Rav zatzal](#)