

Parashat Shoftim, 5778, 2018:

The Power of Tzedek

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 Yecheiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chaim Mordechai Hakohen ben Natan Yitzchak, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Avraham Yechezkel ben Yaakov Halevy, Shayna Yehudit bat Avraham Manes and Rivka, and Shoshana Elka bat Avraham, the *refuah shlaimah* of Yakir Ephraim ben Rachel Devorah, Eliezer ben Sarah, Anshul Pinchas ben Chaya and Tzvi Yoel ben Yocheved and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

Our *parasha* contains the celebrated verse, “Justice (*tzedek*), justice (*tzedek*) shall you pursue (*tirdof*), [in order] that you may live and possess the land the L-rd, your G-d, is giving you.” (*Sefer Devarim* 16:20, Bible and Rashi translations except where noted, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*) In his *Commentary on the Torah*, Rashi (1040-1105), basing himself on a variety of Rabbinic sources, explains the words, “justice, justice shall you pursue,” as referring to one’s obligation to “seek out a good court,” in order to ensure that true and abiding justice will be achieved. Given his stature in Jewish thought, this has become the classic way of understanding our phrase.

Rabbi Benjamin Yudin *shlita*, Rav in Fairlawn, New Jersey, and Rosh Yeshiva at Yeshiva University, once made reference to a different application of “*tzedek, tzedek tirdof*” that focuses upon “affirming with certainty that what’s yours is really yours:”

Alexander the Great once visited the community of Afriki and wished to observe its judicial system. Two men came before the king for justice. The first said, “I purchased a plot of land from this man, and when I dug to lay the foundation of a home, I found a treasure buried there. I only bought the land, not the treasure, therefore it is not mine.” The seller said, “I, too, am fearful of the biblical prohibition of ‘*lo tigzol*’ - ‘do not steal’ and I, too, do not want it back unless it is definitely mine.” The king (judge) asked the buyer if he had a son, he answered “yes.” The seller answered positively to having a daughter. “Wonderful,” said the king, “let them marry and share the treasure.” (*Midrash Vayikra Rabbah*, 27:1, http://torahweb.org/torah/2009/parsha/ryud_shoftim.html)

Like the story in this Midrash, Rabbeinu Bahya ben Asher ibn Halawa (Rabbeinu Behaye, 1340 – 1255) stresses the importance of *tzedek* in all of our actions. In so doing, he explains our phrase's repetition of "*tzedek*" 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... As such, 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 and underlining my own)

Without a doubt, the expression, "*tzedek, tzedek tirdof*" has become a watchword among the Jewish people. This concept was given powerful voice in our own time by United States Associate Supreme Court Justice, Ruth Bader Ginsburg, in her stirring speech at the Capitol Rotunda 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." (<http://www.ushmm.org/remember/days-of-remembrance/past-days-of-remembrance/2004-days-of-remembrance/ruth-bader-ginsburg>)

With Hashem's help, may we each pursue the noble goal of *tzedek, tzedek tirdof*, in order that we may ever be counted among those who "neither commit injustice nor speak lies." If we can achieve this lofty goal, we will be well on our way to fulfilling the prophet Micha's ancient words: "O man, what is good, and what does the L-rd demand of you; but to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with your G-d." (*Sefer Micha* 6:8, translation my own) May this time come soon and in our days. *V'chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom

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They may also be found on <http://www.yutorah.org/> using the search criteria of Etengoff
and the parasha's name.

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* for Women 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.