

Parashat Shoftim 5782, 2022:

Tzedek Tzedek Tirdof

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, the *refuah shlaimah* of Mordechai HaLevi ben Miriam Tovah, and the health and safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

Our *parasha* includes the celebrated verse: “Justice, justice you shall pursue (*tzedek tzedek tirdof*), that you may live and possess the land Hashem, your G-d, is giving you.” (*Sefer Devarim* 16:20, this and all Tanach translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*, with my emendations) As this commandment is given to the entire Jewish people, we must have a shared understanding as to what the term *tzedek* means. Fortunately, in his Aramaic elucidation of the Torah, Onkelos (35-120 CE) helps us find just such common ground. He interprets *tzedek tzedek tirdof* as, *kushta kushta hevai radif* (“Truth, truth you shall pursue.”) This explanation is buttressed in two *pasukim* in *Sefer Tehillim* wherein “justice” and “truth” appear in juxtaposition:

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)

Onkelos’ penetrating insight into the authentic nature of *tzedek*, reveals that it is inseparable from *emet*: That which is just, is that which is true.

Why, did the Torah deem it necessary to repeat the word *tzedek*, when it appears “*tzedek tirdof*—you should pursue justice” would have been sufficient? In his *Commentary on the Torah* on our *pasuk*, the Ibn Ezra (c. 1089-1092 to c. 1164-1167) offers the following multi-level answer:

The reason [why the Torah states] “*tzedek*” twice [in our verse, is three-fold in nature]: [Regardless] as to whether you benefit or suffer a loss [from pursuing *tzedek*, you must unhesitatingly do so]; another reason for this repetition is [to teach us] that [achieving] *tzedek* is a lifelong quest; then, too, it is to strengthen our resolve [to make *tzedek* the touchstone of our lives]. (Translation and brackets my own)

The Ibn Ezra interprets the repetition of *tzedek* as a charge to individuals, in the sense that it must be our unfailing objective no matter how we may be affected on a practical level. Moreover, in his view, we must realize that in order to make *tzedek* an intrinsic part of our lives, we must ever be vigilant.

Closer to our own time, in his *Commentary on the Torah* on our verse, Rabbeinu Shimshon Raphael Hirsch (1808-1888) expands upon the Ibn Ezra’s position and views the repetition of *tzedek* as the Torah’s attempt to shape the behavior of the entire Jewish people, both on the individual and 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 coupled with complete dedication. (Translation and underlining my own from the Hebrew edition of the German text)

This concept has been part of Jewish consciousness for centuries. As Yeshayahu the prophet declared so long ago: “And I [Hashem] will restore your judges as at first and your counselors as in the beginning; afterwards you shall be called City of Righteousness (*ihr hatzedek*), Faithful City. *Tzion* shall be redeemed through justice and those who return unto her through righteousness (*bitzdakah*).” (1:26-27) With Hashem’s help and our fervent desire, may this time come soon and in our days, *v’chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom

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*** 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](#)