

Glatt Yosher

The fundamental principles of Judaism - love and fear of God, the Ten Commandments and the obligation to study Torah - are all addressed in Parshat Va'etchanan. This being the case, how then do we understand a verse which follows these directives:

“You shall do that which is right (yashar) and good (tov) in the eyes of the Lord” (Devarim 6:18).

We are confronted with a simple query: In what way does “right and good” differ from all the commandments previously stated. The great Torah teacher Nechama Leibowitz a”h posed the question this way: “Surely one who fulfils all the positive and negative commandments in the Torah ipso facto fulfills the admonition to do what is ‘right and good in the eyes of the Lord!’” What new obligation then does this admonition imply? (Studies in Devarim, p. 58).

Both Rashi and Ramban share a related approach. Rashi says that there are times that we are to go above the letter of law; ‘doing the right and the good’ prods us to disclose and exercise the deeper

meaning of the law. Additionally, posits the Ramban, there are many scenarios in which the Torah or even halachah does not directly address an issue, therefore it is here that one applies the spirit and essence of the law. Often in everyday life there are cases to which no direct or explicit mitzvah in the Torah applies.

K'DOSHIM TIHYU, “You shall be holy” (Vayikra 19:2). It is well known that the Ramban makes the case that it is quite possible to observe the letter of the law of the Torah and yet be far from living a good and holy way of life. One can sin by overindulging in eating and drinking or in sexual relations, to cite two examples.

The Ramban thus shows how it is possible for a man to keep to the letter of the Torah and yet violate its spirit. This then is the implication of the two directives “You shall be holy” and “You shall do that which is right and good.” The importance of Yashrut is that it is not only a positive character trait, but the defining attribute for one who wants to act in accordance with the will of God.

This all encompassing perspective regarding the notion of yashrut was captured beautifully by Rav Avraham Yizchak HaKohen Kook zt”l based on the verse from Tehillim:

OR ZARU'A... "Light is sown for the righteous (tzaddik), and joy for the upright (yashar) of heart." (Psalms 97:11)

We generally assume that the term tzaddik describes a person who attains the highest place in religious devotion and yet the verse suggests that the yashar attains an even higher level. The Talmud (Ta'anit 15a) confirms that this verse teaches that the yashar is more elevated. Who then is the tzaddik and who is the yashar? Rav Kook answers that the tzaddik is identified as one who overcomes his inclinations and subdues his yetzer hara to do God's will. The yashar, on the other hand, aligns his will with God's will. The yashar does not feel tension. He cleaves to God. His inner world harmonizes with the will of the Divine. (Siddur Olat Re'iyah Vol. 2, 17)

The Netziv, Rabbi Naftali Zvi Yehuda Berlin (1816-1893) who headed the famed yeshiva of Volozhin, spotlighted precisely this point in his introduction to Sefer Bereshit: A person could be a tzaddik and a chassid immersed in Torah and still not be yashar. Yashar means dealing with others in a straight honest way with mercy and compassion. The forefathers, he argues, were yesharim, this being their highest

accolade. They always treated others, even idolaters, and those of different habits, respectfully and lovingly, and were concerned with their welfare. They acknowledged that, after all, every human being constitutes a part of the Almighty's creation.

Noteworthy in this context is a parallel lesson the Netziv conveys in his introduction to the final book of the Torah. Once again he emphasizes that the purpose of Torah and the book of Devarim in particular is to provide the guidelines and inspiration needed for a Jew to achieve yashrut.

Perhaps the Netziv bases his thesis on a Talmudic passage which asks, "Which book of the Torah is entitled Sefer Hayashar?" The answer is debated; one opinion claims it is the book of Bereshit, based on the fact that it contains the story of the 'Yesharim': Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov. The second opinion claims that it must be the last book of the Torah, Devarim, where the verse, "You shall do that which is right (yashar) and good" is found (Talmud Avodah Zara 25b).

Possibly, these two positions are not at odds. Rather, both books articulate a unified ideal: the pursuit of yashrut. Moreover, the fact that this theme animates the opening and

closing of the Torah suggests that the books in the center, which contain the abundance of mitzvot, are meant to offer multiple pathways to achieving this esteemed goal.

Rabbi Isaac Breuer (1882-1980) was the illustrious rabbi of the German Jewish community in Washington Heights, New York. He was famed for his Torah learning as well as for his ethical teachings. He argued that it is not enough for a Jew to be concerned that he eats glatt kosher but he is to be as stringent to live by the standards of 'glatt yosher.' He explains that the word 'kosher' is strongly connected to 'yashar' or 'yosher', upright. The Torah not only demands that we keep kosher, it also insists that we need to aspire to treat others with respect. This means that Jews must practice justice and righteousness and avoid even the faintest trace of dishonesty in their business dealings and personal lives. As much as one strives for excellence in observance of the rituals, like being glatt kosher, we should be as uncompromising when it comes to our ethical and interpersonal matters; this is what it means to be 'glatt yosher.' ('Rav Breuer, His Life and Legacy' p.238)

Defining what constitutes a life of yashrut includes a very wide range of

ethical and noble conduct. Consider the following three examples found in the Torah and Talmud that help concretize for us this lofty notion:

Rabbi Yeshaya Shapiro zt"l, belovedly known as the Admor HaChalutz (d. 1942) was a brother of the famed Rebbe of Piaseczna. The Admor heroically made aliyah in 1920 before the onset of the Holocaust and remarkably became an important leader and thinker in the Religious Zionist world. In his writings he addressed the issue of the injunction "to do that which is just and good." Like others he explains that "we must penetrate deeper in order to arrive at the ultimate aim of the Torah rulings." (Quoted by Nechama Leibowitz, Parshat Ve'etchanan).

The Rebbe proudly added that now that we as a people are returning to the Land of Israel we have the opportunity to see the way of yashrut observed more fully and we can endeavor to design a society that adheres to these lofty standards. "In the Diaspora, many of our people did not pay close attention to these warnings because of our bitter exile, but now we must renew our vigilance in Eretz Yisrael, where we desire to create a new life for our people." ("Netiva" published 1929, as quoted on the Mizrachi World Movement

website)

A) The Admor cites the following Talmudic case as a model: When one rightfully seizes the property for a debt that has not been paid, the law states that one no longer, by law, needs to return the property to the owner. However, Jewish law, in accordance with the principle “to do that which is just and good” says that if the individual who was unable to pay the credit now brings the money to pay his debt, the land should now be returned to the original owner. (Bava Metzia 16b)

Noteworthy in this example is that the principle “to do that which is just and good” is actually integrated into the very fabric of the halacha. Rebbe Yeshaya Shapiro taught that this halacha demonstrates that not only is the Torah concerned with helping a fellow person and animal but also aspires to “eradicate potential evil from the soul of man.” In this case, when the person now returns long after to pay back his debt, it would be merciless to refuse the funds and hold on to the property which was so precious and important to the original owner. (See Rambam, Loveh U'Malveh 22:16)

B) The middah of yashrut is essential in the following case as well. The Torah states, “If you see your

enemy's donkey struggling under its load... help him, even many times (Shemot 23:5). The purpose of this mitzvah is to cultivate the trait of compassion within us. It is very surprising that the pasuk presents the case of ‘your enemy's donkey’. Indeed, this is the point. The Talmud tells us that if we have the opportunity to assist either a friend of an enemy in such a case, we must assist the enemy first in order to overcome our natural inclinations (Bava Metzia 32b). The great Baal Mussar, Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler, emphasized that by choosing to assist the enemy, the bystander “wages war” against his natural impulse to feel hatred towards him (Michtav MeEliyahu, Kuntres Hachessed Chap. 4).

C) Nechama Leibowitz, in her analysis of this subject on Parshat Va'etchanan, cites a third example where yashrut plays a central role in business practices. The Talmud says that one who is selling his land is obligated to give his neighbor who has an adjoining field the first opportunity to make the purchase. Why, one may ask, does the seller not have the right to sell it to anyone he pleases? Is there any verse in the Torah that demands this practice? The answer is yes: “You shall do that which is just and good.” The Sages

said that since the payment the owner receives is the same, it is only right and good that the adjacent land owner be able to purchase a field close to home that will be helpful to him.

All three cases advance the concept of “doing that which is just and good”. The Torah wants us to take the high road, which makes us better and more noble people.

Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein zt”l (1933-2015), one of the great Talmudic minds of the twenty-first century, wrote about an incident that encapsulates in many ways the notion of yashrut and its place in our religious practice.

“I was once walking with my family in the Beit Yisrael neighborhood, where R. Isser Zalman Meltzer used to live. For the most part, it consists of narrow alleys. We came to a corner, and found a merchant stuck there with his car. The question came up as to how to help him; it was a clear case of perika u-te’ina (helping one load or unload his burden). There were some youngsters there from the neighborhood, who judging by their looks were probably ten or eleven years old. They saw that this merchant was not wearing a kippa. So they began a whole pilpul, based on the gemara in Pesachim (113b), about

whether they should help him or not. They said, “If he walks about bareheaded, presumably he doesn’t separate terumot u-ma’asrot, so he is suspect of eating and selling untithed produce....” I wrote Rabbi Soloveitchik a letter at that time, and told him of the incident. I ended with the comment, “Children of the age from our camp would not have known the gemara, but they would have helped him.” My feeling then was: Why, Ribbon Shel Olam, must this be our choice? Can’t we find children who would have helped him and still know the gemara? Do we have to choose? I hope not; I believe not. If forced to choose, however, I would have no doubts where my loyalties lie: I prefer that they know less gemara but help him. (Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein, By His Light, p. 249)

This remains a memorable conclusion for this Torah giant. His life was dedicated to the beit midrash and Jewish learning, yet, he always felt that moral responsibility, yashrut, is the underlying principle that must absolutely animate and guide our perspective and behavior.

One of the earliests conceptualizations of this mitzvah was offered by Rabbi Yehuda Hanasi, who codified the Mishnah, known as ‘Rebbe’, the rabbi par excellence. He asks, “Which

is the course of yashrut, that a person should choose for himself?' He answers: "A way of life which reflects glory on the Almighty - and brings honor to him from all those who surround him" (Pirkei Avot 2:1).