



## הטוב והישר The Good and the Right

### ■ In G-d's Eyes

The weekly Torah portion of Re'eh begins with a warning:

לֹא תַעֲשׂוּן כְּכֹל אֲשֶׁר אֲנַחֲנוּ עֹשִׂים פֹּה הַיּוֹם, אִישׁ כָּל הַיֵּשֶׁר בְּעֵינָיו.

*Do not do as we do today,  
every man as is right in his own eyes.* (D'varim 12,8)

The warning follows a special dispensation given Israel during their 40 years in the desert, permitting them to eat the meat of sacrifices and burnt offerings wherever they wanted. The nation is now being warned that the situation is about to change: When they enter the Promised Land, where the Mishkan or its successor, the Beit HaMikdash, will be assigned a permanent place – such as Shilo and Jerusalem – they will be permitted to eat of the sacrifices only there.

Let us concentrate on the phrase *every man as is right in his own eyes*, describing the situation that is not acceptable. The Torah wishes to emphasize that the standard for correct behavior is not determined by our own opinions and what is right in our own eyes. Rather, it must be that which is right in G-d's eyes.

The Torah emphasizes this in a later verse in the same chapter:

... לְמַעַן יִיטֵב לָךְ וּלְבִנְיֶיךָ אַחֲרֶיךָ כִּי תַעֲשֶׂה הַיֵּשֶׁר בְּעֵינֵי ה'.  
*...so that it will be good for you and your children afterwards,  
if you do that which is right in G-d's eyes.* (verse 25)



And just to make sure, Moshe Rabbeinu emphasizes this same point yet again just three verses later:

... לְמַעַן יִיטֵב לָךְ וּלְבְנֵיךָ אַחֲרַיִךְ עַד עוֹלָם,  
כִּי תַעֲשֶׂה הַטּוֹב וְהַיָּשָׁר בְּעֵינֵי ה' אֱ-לֹהֶיךָ.

*... so that it will be good for you and your children afterwards,  
forever; if you do that which is good and right in  
the eyes of Hashem your G-d.* (verse 28)

Actually, this last verse adds two elements to the previous verse. It refers not only to doing *right*, but also to that which is *good and right*. It also promises us goodness not only for our children, but *forever*.

Before we delve into the significance of these two additions, let us see how our great Sages understood this verse. In the Medrash Sifri, a famous Halakhic Medrash written by the Sages of the Mishna, we see that R. Akiva and R. Yishmael understood this verse in similar, yet opposite, ways:

R. Akiva said *good* refers to finding favor in G-d's eyes, and *right* alludes to finding favor in man's eyes.

R. Yishmael said *right* refers to finding favor in G-d's eyes, and *good* means finding favor in man's eyes.

As is written: "*Find grace and good understanding in the eyes of G-d and man.*" (Proverbs 3,4)

Though the two Sages disagree on the precise interpretation of the verse – we will discuss this below – they both agree that a person must find favor in the sight of both G-d and man. But the Torah mentioned only *the eyes of G-d*. Why do R. Akiva and R. Yishmael both insist on our finding favor in man's eyes as well? Where does the Torah allude to this point, which appears to be found only in Proverbs?

### ■ Crossing the Jordan

The answer is found in Moshe Rabbeinu's words to the tribes of Reuven and Gad. These tribes wished to settle on the east bank of the Jordan River, and not in the original Promised Land. Moshe told them they must first participate, together with the other tribes, in the conquest of the Land, and that only thus would they be נקיים מה' ומישראל, *blameless before G-d and before Israel*. (Bamidbar 32,22)



Moshe's clear instruction provides an important lesson: It is not enough to act blamelessly vis-a-vis G-d; one must also make sure that his actions are suspicion-free in the eyes of his fellow man.

The verse in Proverbs adds that we may not suffice simply with being cleared of suspicion; we must also take positive action to actively "***find favor and good understanding***" both in G-d's view and in man's eyes.

Therefore, when the Torah refers to ***that which is good and right in the eyes of Hashem***, it means to teach that in G-d's eyes, we must find favor in man's eyes as well. This approach is summed up by R. Yehuda HaNasi, the author of the Mishna, who taught in Ethics of the Fathers:

Which is the correct and straight path that one must choose for himself? That which is a credit to its doer, and which also earns him respect from his fellow man. (Avot 2,1)

The Meiri, a great 13<sup>th</sup> century commentator on the Talmud, explained the words "its doer" as meaning "G-d, He Who created the mitzvah." The Mishna thus means to teach that we must enable Hashem to take pride in our actions, and cause the people around us look up to us as well.

Still and all, why is the good opinion of one's fellow man so important?

### ■ The Good and the Straight

When the Torah recommends that we "***do that which is right in G-d's eyes***," it means "that which is correct and appropriate." What does the Torah then mean when it adds the element of "goodness" to the requirements, as in the above verse (D'varim 12,28): "***Do that which is good and right in the eyes of Hashem your G-d***"?

This new phrase gives new meaning to both words: *Tov*, goodness, is the essence and the end-all goal, while *yashar*, meaning "straight" or "correct," stands for the manner in which the goodness is carried out. When the Torah combines them and instructs us to do ***good and right in G-d's eyes***, it is referring both to the overall objective – "goodness" – and to the way in which it is achieved, namely, "correctly and justly."

The overall objective of G-d's commandments is our eternal goodness. We see this in the answer that the Torah provides for the Wise Son of the Passover Haggadah, who asks:



מָה הַעֲדוֹת וְהַחֻקִּים וְהַמִּשְׁפָּטִים אֲשֶׁר צִוָּה ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ אֲתָכֶם?

*What are these testimonies,  
statutes and laws that Hashem our  
G-d has commanded you? (D'varim 6,20)*

The boy wishes to know the essence of these laws. And the answer he receives is that they are for our benefit:

וַיִּצְוֵנוּ ה' לַעֲשׂוֹת אֶת כָּל הַחֻקִּים הָאֵלֶּה...  
לְטוֹב לָנוּ כָּל הַיָּמִים לְחַיֵּינוּ כְּהַיּוֹם הַזֶּה.

*Hashem commanded us to fulfill all these statutes...  
that it be good for us forever, to give us life as this day. (verse 24)*

This echoes Moshe's words to Israel in Parashat Ekev:

וַעֲתָה יִשְׂרָאֵל מָה ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ שִׂאֵל מֵעַמּוֹךְ  
כִּי אִם לִירְאָה אֶת ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ לְלַכֵּת בְּכָל דַּרְכָּיו... לְטוֹב לָךְ.

*Now, Israel, what does Hashem ask of you,  
if only to fear Him and to walk in His ways...  
so that it will be good for you. (10,12-13)*

In other words: Is Hashem asking so much of you? He merely wants you to keep the Torah – for your own benefit!

In any event, as mentioned, it is not enough to consider only the purpose of the mitzvot, i.e., the “good.” We must also concentrate on *how* the mitzvot are carried out. We must perform them in a manner that will be acceptable and pleasing to others – i.e., in a manner that is “right and correct” in the eyes of G-d.

This differentiation between “good” and “right” finds expression in the story of Balak and Bil'am. King Balak wanted Bil'am to curse Israel, but Bil'am realized that he could not do so without violating G-d's word. Balak, quite disappointed, thought the problem might be the physical location, and so he said:

לָכֵּה נָא אֶקְחֶךָ אֶל מְקוֹם אֲחֵר,  
אוּלַי יִישַׁר בְּעֵינֵי הָאֱלֹהִים וְקִבְּלוּ לִי מִשָּׁם.

*Come, please, I will take you to a different place,  
perhaps [there] it will be right in the sight of G-d,  
and you will curse them for me from there. (Bamidbar 23,27)*

Balak means to say that if G-d is concentrating on the “how,” and is simply looking for a location to facilitate the cursing of Israel, he has an idea for



Him. Bil'am, on the other hand, understood that the “problem” was not one of “means,” nor of “how to carry out the curse” - but rather that in principle, G-d wants to bless Israel and bring upon them goodness. This is why, when he responded, he did not use the word *yashar* (“right, correct”), but rather *tov* (“good”):

וַיֵּרָא בְלָעָם כִּי טוֹב בְּעֵינֵי ה' לְבָרֵךְ אֶת יִשְׂרָאֵל ...

*Bil'am saw that it was good in G-d's eyes to bless Israel ... (24,1)*

Let us now note again that Moshe Rabbeinu added two elements in the above-quoted verse (D'varim 12,28): “goodness” and “forever.” This tells us that when the end-all objective of “goodness” joins with means that are “right and correct,” then G-d's guarantee for goodness is “forever.”

### ■ The Double Assignment

We asked above: Why are we so concerned with what our neighbors and friends think about us? Our Sages find the answer in the following verse in Shma Yisrael:

וְאַהֲבַת אֵת ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ ...

*You shall love Hashem your G-d... (6,5)*

They derive from it an important lesson:

**It means that you must cause G-d's Name to be beloved. One who studies and tends to Torah scholars, and conducts his business affairs honestly, and speaks calmly with others - what will people then say about him? They will say: “How fortunate is his father who taught him Torah! How fortunate is his teacher who taught him Torah!”**

(Yoma 86a)

As such, we have a double mission:

1. To precisely carry out G-d's will, and
2. To do so in a way that will make others want to do the same.

We must first study in detail how to fulfill G-d's mitzvot exactly as He commanded. In addition, we must do so in a manner that will excite other people and motivate them to say, “This is the true path!”

This is also the meaning of the Blessings Over the Torah that we recite every day in our morning prayers: *V'haarev na, Please sweeten the Torah in our mouths and in the mouths of Your nation Israel:* “Help us to see for



ourselves, and then show others, the sweetness and beauty in the words of the Torah, in order that everyone will want to share in them.”

This approach will help us understand the words of R. Chanina ben Dosa in Pirkei Avot:

**He who is liked by his fellow men is also pleasing to Hashem, and whoever is not liked by men is not pleasing to Hashem.** (Avot 3,10)

Can it be that someone who buys friends by giving them gifts and flattery is pleasing to Hashem!? This is most certainly not R. Chanina's intention. Rather, he is referring to one who is engaged in doing mitzvot – and finds favor in people's eyes at the same time! Anyone who fulfills the mitzvot and walks in G-d's path in such a way that causes others to be pleased with him, is truly one with whom G-d is pleased.

And the opposite is true as well: If one fulfills the commandments in an annoying or offensive manner, Hashem rejects this.

### ■ The Point of Departure

Let us return to the dispute between R. Akiva and R. Yishmael regarding “*doing good and the right*.” R. Akiva says that we must *do good* in *G-d's eyes*, and that which is *right* in *man's eyes*; R. Yishmael says the opposite. What R. Akiva means is that one must first clarify what is *good* in *G-d's eyes*, and only then must he find the *right and correct* ways to carry it out so as to find favor in *man's eyes*.

R. Akiva himself went through a very intense experience that taught him this precise message. Here is his story:

This is how I started learning from Torah scholars. I was once walking on the road and I came upon a *met mitzvah*, an unburied corpse [the burial of which is a tremendous mitzvah]. I carried it on my shoulders for four mils (kilometers) until I reached a cemetery, and I buried it there.

When I told this story to R. Eliezer and R. Yehoshua, they said to me: “For every step you took, it was as if you spilt innocent blood - for you should have buried it where you found it.”

I said to them, “My teachers! If when I thought I was meriting a mitzvah, I was actually liable for death, then how much more so is this true when I didn't even *think* I was doing a mitzvah!”



**From that time on, I never stopped tending to and learning from Torah scholars.** (Jerusalem Talmud, Nazir 7,1)

This story teaches us that one must first study and clarify the Divine truth in the Beit Medrash, and only afterwards must he find ways to make it pleasing to others.

R. Yishmael, on the other hand, says we must do *what is correct* in *G-d's eyes*, and then *that which is good* in *man's eyes*. The word *good* appears before *correct* in the verse, indicating that one must first clarify that which is *good* in man's eyes, and only then must he do that which is *right and correct*.

This opinion appears strange. Must one first verify what men want, and only afterwards find out what Hashem wants? Let us try to clarify R. Yishmael's opinion, starting with a review of the sin of the first man, Adam.

#### ■ The Path of the Tree of Life

R. Yishmael ben Nachman teaches in the Medrash (Vayikra Rabba 9,3):

*Derekh Eretz preceded Torah by 26 generations, as is written in* (B'reshit 3,24): לשמור את דרך עץ החיים - *to protect the path of the Tree of Life: the path, derekh, refers to derekh eretz, followed afterwards by the Tree of Life, which is Torah.*

This means that before one reaches the Torah, the Tree of Life, one must take the proper path. Adam, the subject of this chapter in B'reshit, did not take the correct path to the Tree of Life, and this is why he sinned.

In what way did he not take the correct path? – In not appreciating G-d's goodness. For it was only out of concern for Adam and his future that G-d commanded him not to eat from the Tree of Knowledge. But, at the evil counsel of the serpent, Adam looked upside-down at the situation: He thought that G-d had His own personal interests in mind, and that He wanted Adam not to be like Him, so that He could remain unique in the world.

Clearly, if Adam had acted ethically and appreciatively, he would have been grateful to the One who had been so generous with him. Adam would have said to himself: "Hashem created me, gave me life, brought me into the gates of Paradise, and created a helpmate for me. Is it conceivable that He wants to harm me, as the serpent is implying? If this were true, He never



would have brought me into Paradise in the first place, and then He would not have had to command me not to eat from the Tree of Knowledge!”

But Adam did not ask himself this, because such a question is based on the trait of appreciation. Because he was lacking in thankfulness, he accepted the snake’s approach. He was short on *derekh erez*, and this is why he sinned.

Avraham Avinu, on the other hand, came to know and appreciate G-d precisely **because** he had *derekh erez*. He asked himself one question: “Whom must I thank for this amazing world to which I have been privileged to belong?” In the end, of course, this led him to Hashem.

This is R. Yishmael’s approach in his dispute with R. Akiva. R. Yishmael said that *good* vis-a-vis people comes before *right and correct* in one’s relationship with G-d. One must first adopt a way of life of *derekh erez* and good character traits, such as humility and recognizing the good, in his dealings with other people. This *good* will lead him directly to the *correctness* required of his relationship with Hashem – and this is why *good* (vis-à-vis people) precedes *right and correct* (towards Hashem) in the verse in question.

### ■ Another Verse: The Right and Good

There is another verse in the Torah that notes these two concepts, but in the reverse order:

וְעָשִׂיתָ הַיָּשָׁר וְהַטּוֹב בְּעֵינֵי ה' לְמַעַן יֵטֵב לָךְ ...

*You shall do the right and the good in G-d's eyes,  
so that it will be well for you.* (D'varim 6,18)

This verse, from Parashat Va’etchanan, appears just after the warning not to “test Hashem your G-d, as you tested Him in Masa.” (verse 16)

In general, whenever a pair of words appears in the Torah in two different orders, the intention is that though the two may not be equal, they are of similar importance.

A distinct example of this occurs in the verses referring to one’s obligations towards his parents. The Torah says both *Honor your father and your mother* (Sh’mot 20,12) and also *A person must fear his mother and father* (Vayikra 19,3). In one verse, the father is listed first, and in the second verse, the mother is first. The idea is that one must treat both his parents equally well, though





there are different considerations for each, depending on whether the charge at hand is to “fear” or “honor.”

Here, too, regarding *good* and *right*, we will use this rule, and conclude that the Torah sees the two terms – referring to the means and the ends, respectively – as different yet equal.

The Mishnaic sage R. Yaakov brings out this point as well in Pirkei Avot:

**One hour spent in repentance and good deeds in This World is worth more than all of *Olam HaBa* (the World to Come). And one hour of spiritual bliss in *Olam HaBa* is worth more than all life in This World.**

(Avot 4,17)

What R. Yaakov is saying is that This World is simply a means by which to reach the goal, namely, *Olam HaBa*. This is why one hour in *Olam HaBa* is worth more than all of This World. However, despite this, one hour’s time in This World can be worth more than all of *Olam HaBa* – if it is spent on good deeds. For in This World, one can always improve and ascend the ladder of sanctity, while in the World to Come, one’s level is set and cannot be changed.

The conclusion therefore is: The “right” and the “good” are different but equal. As King Solomon taught us:

טוב אשר תִּאָחַז בְּזָה וְגַם מִזָּה אַל תִּנָּח אֶת יָדְךָ...

*It is good that you should take hold of the one,  
and also from the other do not withdraw your hand...*

(Kohélet 7,18)

