



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

DEVARIM > Shoftim

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Shoftim

**When Righteousness
Is Murder**



Meaningful Sermons *“Words from the Heart Enter the Heart”*

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ABSTRACT

A provocative question: Can someone pursue righteous justice in an unjust and unrighteous way?

An example: Making a neighbor sick just so that we may fulfill the positive commandment to visit the sick? Robbing a neighbor blind just to fulfill the mitzvah of giving charity to the poor?

In short: Do the ends, in these instances, justify the means?

Tzedek, tzedek tirdof, says our Torah portion – “Justice, justice (or righteousness, righteousness) you shall pursue.”

Why does the Torah repeat itself? What is true justice and righteousness? And why should we specifically “pursue” it, not simply implement it?

Two beautiful Chassidic teachings – one from the Sfas Emes and one from the Rabbi Simcha Bunim of Peshischa – and a seemingly “unkosher” story from Shmuel Munkes, instruct us how to be righteous today.

For the zealous pursuit of justice must be righteous itself, lest it be only a zealous pursuit.

WHEN RIGHTEOUSNESS IS MURDER

1. Full Of Mitzvoth (Humor)

In a small town in Eastern Europe, a poor beggar once approached the home of an extremely wealthy but very stingy man. "Sir, I haven't had a morsel of food in more than two days," he said. "Can you please spare something to eat?"

The rich man reached into his garbage can and took out an old, rotten and smelly piece of fish and gave it to the beggar, who consumed it within a few seconds. As the poor man thanked his host and left the home, he collapsed in the street. They rushed him to the local hospital.

That evening, after returning home from the evening services in the synagogue, the wealthy man informed his wife that he would be going out that night. "The poor man who ate in our home suddenly fell ill, and he was taken to the hospital. I must go visit him and fulfill the great mitzvah of visiting the sick."

The following morning, after returning home from the synagogue's morning service, the man told his wife: "I have a busy day ahead of me. In the synagogue they announced that the poor beggar died early this morning, and that his funeral would take place at 2 p.m. I must attend the funeral of this man and perform the great mitzvah of escorting the dead on their final journey."

That evening, after returning home from synagogue, the wealthy man informed his wife once again that he would be out late. "At the funeral they announced that the deceased beggar was survived by a son. I must go pay him a *shiva* call and perform the great mitzvah of comforting a person who is in mourning."

When the wealthy man returned that night from the *shiva* call, his face was beaming with joy. His entire countenance radiated with happiness. He was so ecstatic that he could barely contain himself.

“What are you so happy about?” his wife asked him. “What was so exciting about visiting an orphan sitting *shiva*?”

To which the wealthy miser replied: “How could I not be overjoyed when I think of how many tremendous mitzvot I performed with merely one small stinky piece of fish!”

2. Parshat Shoftim

One of the better-known Torah verses is read in the opening lines of our portion, *Parshat Shoftim*:

*Tzedek, Tzedek tirdof – Justice, justice shall you pursue – or alternatively translated righteousness, righteousness you shall pursue – so that you may live and possess the land the Lord, your God, is giving you.*¹

According to the 11th century Torah commentator, Rashi, the literal meaning, coming on the heels of the commandment to establish a system of law and order, is clear: You shall seek out a just and righteous court.

In general, the fundamental idea is to pursue and seek out justice and righteousness.

The unique language of the verse, however, shouts out that there is much more going on here; many more lessons for us to unpack from these three words.

Firstly, why does the Torah repeat the words “justice, justice/righteousness, righteousness,” *tzedek tzedek*?

Secondly, the word for “pursue,” *tirdof*, is a very peculiar choice for it most commonly refers to a *rodef*, a “murderer,” who is zealously pursuing and single-mindedly chasing someone with intent to kill.² Why associate *tzedek* with *rodef*?

¹ Deuteronomy 16:20.

² See Sanhedrin 73a.

Thirdly, what's the connection between *tzedek*, *tzedek tirdof* and the conclusion of the verse, *so that you may live and possess the land the Lord, your God, is giving you?*

Fourthly and perhaps most importantly – in addition to the obvious and literal instruction to pursue justice and live righteously – what hidden and deep lessons do these unique words offer us in our personal daily lives today?

3. The Teaching of Sfas Emes

The Second Rebbe of Gur, Rabbi Yehudah Aryeh Leib Alter – better known as Sfas Emes – expounds beautifully on the double *tzedek*.

Says the Sfas Emes: There is no end to justice, righteousness and truth, for they are eternal. A righteous act is a reflection of the most righteous and truthful of all – God Himself, who is infinite, endless and eternal.

We are righteous – *tzedek* – when we uphold justice through even one truthful and righteous act. The repetition of *tzedek tzedek* teaches us that we must always strive to reach higher states of justice and righteousness, in ways that permeate our entire beings, leading to the ultimate and eternal righteousness, to divine perfection, to the ultimate goal: seamless and utter righteousness throughout all planes and levels of existence.

4. The Teaching of Rabbi Simcha Bunim

Following this interpretation, the Sfas Emes quotes an interpretation of Rabbi Simcha Bunim of Peshischa, one of the foremost leaders of Polish Chassidism.

What does it mean, *tirdof*, to “pursue”? asks Rabbi Simcha Bunim. This is an odd expression, especially as everyone knows that the term “pursue,” is associated with the pursuit by a *rodef*, a murderer.

Why is the action of righteousness link to that of a bloodthirsty murderer or perhaps a fanatical zealot?

Rabbi Simcha Bunim answers: All too often, we become overzealous pursuers of “righteousness,” hurting our fellow human beings in the name of so-called “justice and truth.”

We become so selfishly preoccupied with our pursuit of truth that we become *rodfim* – we hound our fellows armed with the knife of righteousness, persecuting and threatening their lives (like a *rodef*) all in the name of justice and righteousness.

As the Yiddish expression goes: *Blut vet zich gissen uber shalom vet zain* – “Blood will flow but peace we will achieve...!” If blood flow is required for peace, you can imagine what such “peace” is really like. Such “peace” is, in the words of Orwell’s 1984, war...

We can all relate: Some of us can be so concerned that our children do right that we smother them with our righteous love. Some can chastise other Jews to be righteous in the most unrighteous fashion, causing them to be anything but. Some of us demand of our spouses that they be more holy, hurting them in the process and forgetting that *Shalom Bayit* (“peace in the home”) is the more righteous mitzvah of all.

Some of us make it our mission to find everything wrong with every person we meet. We tell ourselves that the Torah mandates we rebuke the sinner, but we forget about the other Torah mandates – like the one that states, “Love your neighbor as yourself” or the one that declares, “Ease your friend’s burden”? In the name of justice, truth and righteousness, we conveniently forget these other mandates and pursue our fellow Jews like a *rodef*.

This is why, explains Rabbi Simcha Bunim, our Torah verse cautions us: *Tzedek, tzedek tirdof* – “Righteousness must be righteously pursued.”

If your pursuit of righteousness is not righteous you have not fulfilled this obligation.

The Torah’s repetition of the word *tzedek* comes to teach us that even that high ideal, righteousness/justice, must be pursued only in such a way that the means are as righteous as the ends, where the pursuit itself is loving, holy, and pure.

5. Roasted Lung (Optional Story)

At a Chassidic get-together (a *farbrengen*) held in the early years of the Chabad Movement, Reb Shmuel Munkes was doing the honors. The merry Chassid danced around the participants, pouring the vodka and serving the food to follow the *L'Chaims*.

Among the dishes which had arrived from the kitchen was a bowl of roasted lung, a most tasty delicacy [anyone here likes roasted lung?...]. But, for some reason, Reb Shmuel was reluctant to part with this particular dish. Throughout the evening he pranced about, pouring the *L'Chaims* and serving the food, with the bowl of roasted lung under his arm, as he deftly sidestepped all attempts to free it from his grasp.

Soon the Chassidim grew weary of Reb Shmuel's game and demanded outright that he hand over the bowl and its mouth-watering contents. But the waiting Chassid ignored their angry demands and kept up his dodging dance. Finally, a few of the younger Chassidim decided that Reb Shmuel's prank had gone on long enough. They rose from the table, and soon the bowl and its bearer were cornered. But with a final leap and twist, Reb Shmuel dumped the roasted lung into the spittoon and broke out in a merry dance.

The younger Chassidim considered this a grave affront to hospitality and decreed that Reb Shmuel had earned a few well-placed stripes. Without batting an eye, Reb Shmuel stretched himself out on the table and received his due. He then set out in search of more food to keep the *farbrengen* going. But the hour was late, and the best he could come up with was a plate of pickled cabbage donated by one of the residents of Liozna.

Upon seeing the replacement dish, the expressions on the faces of those who had already imagined the taste of roasted lung grew as sour as the sauerkraut that was set before them. But soon a commotion was heard in the hallway. The town's butcher ran in, a most stricken look on his face. "Jews! Don't eat the lung!" he cried. "There has been a terrible mistake." It seems that the butcher was out of town, and the butcher's wife mistakenly sent over a non-kosher lung to be roasted for the *farbrengen*.

Now it was the elder Chassidim who sat in judgment upon Reb Shmuel. If he knew the lung to be *treif* why did he dance with it all that time? More stripes were called for.

After receiving his due for the second time that evening, Reb Shmuel explained: "God forbid that I had no 'inside information' regarding the roasted lung. It is only that long time ago I resolved that no material desire would ever dictate to me. So I trained myself not to allow anything physical to overly attract me. But when the bowl of roasted lung arrived, I found that my appetite was most powerfully roused. I also noticed that the same was true of many around the table. To be so strongly drawn by a mere piece of meat? I understood that something was not right."³

6. Personal Lesson

The rule of thumb is this: when we are too eager for something we must stop and ask ourselves: "Why are we so eager?"

When we are keen to pursue *tzedek*, we must ask, "Why, why am I so eager to see justice done in this instance? Is my pure and altruistic pursuit of justice, or am I relishing it too much? Why am I so invested in it? Will people be hurt along the way?"

Tzedek tzedek – think twice to ensure that your justice is truly just, that your righteousness is truly righteous, both in its ends and its means.

If you desire so much to visit the sick or attend funerals, perhaps ask yourself: Wouldn't it be *more* righteous to work towards a world where there is no illness, death, or mourning?

Tzedek is not about you fulfilling mitzvoth. *Tzedek* is about you doing and pursuing what's right – in the right way.

³ As related by the Previous Rebbe, Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak of Lubavitch. Adapted from a translation by Yanki Tauber in *Once a Upon a Chassid* (Kehot, 1994).

Righteousness is not only about praying for the sick, burying the dead, or comforting the grieving. Righteousness is tossing out and obliterating all the stinking fish in this world and uplifting our fellow human beings so that they – and we – never have to experience pain and suffering in the first place.

It is a long road, but this road leads to a destination that is heart-breakingly, heart-fixingly beautiful.

7. The Result: Live and Possess Land (Conclusion)

As the Sfas Emes explains, this road leads to a seamless, eternal and infinite truth and justice of the Only One, who Himself is truth and justice and the Source of all truth and justice, *tzedek v'emet*.

This destination is described at the conclusion of our verse: *so that you may live and possess the land the Lord, your God, is giving you.*

We will have arrived there when we live lives of endless and infinite righteousness pursued in a righteous, just, truthful and beautiful way – that seamlessly permeates our entire beings.

This is what we must steadfastly pursue, especially in this compassionate and loving month of Elul, an acronym for *ani l'dodi v'dodi li*, I am to my beloved and my beloved is to me. In this month we increase our acts of righteousness and compassion, as a preparation for God blessing us with a new year of compassion and righteousness

And this is what will lead us to the Ultimate Redemption, when ultimate and complete *tzedek* is reached.

May we never lose sight of this destination and may the fruit of our labors be revealed immediately. Amen!

Shabbat Shalom!

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