

# AVODAH: YOU SHALL DO WHAT IS RIGHT AND GOOD

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

## You Shall Do What Is Right and Good <sup>1</sup>

You might expect that expert spiritual advice to practicing kabbalists would sound esoteric and other-worldly. We would not be surprised to find a recipe, for example, of one part meditation and two parts recombining the letters of Hashem's holy names. Instead, Shomer Emunim's[2] recommendations are so down-to-earth, that even the non-kabbalist will cheer.

Don't let go of two *pesukim* he writes. Keep them forever on your lips. "*V'asisa ya Yashar vehatov* - And you shall do what is right and good in the eyes of Hashem"[3] is one of them. The other is "You shall be holy.[4]" These two commandments are special because they include many mitzvos and prohibitions that are not explicitly mentioned in the Torah.

Ramban takes note of the fact that Chazal understand *v'asisa yaYashar vehatov* as instruction to go beyond the requirements of the law. First, he says, the Torah tells us to scrupulously observe the commandments that it specifically commands. Then, he says, it turns to areas that are not legislated, and asks us to be sure to do what is right and good, since this is, after all, what Hashem holds dear. This instruction is crucial, because it covers what otherwise would be a huge gap in the law. The Torah legislates liberally regarding interpersonal relations. But it is impossible to be comprehensive through fixed laws and statutes. So much depends on circumstances, and the personalities of the individuals involved. The Torah essentially tells us to legislate for our selves - to extend the ethic of goodness that we find running through the other mitzvos, and apply it as it fits each unique situation that arises.

Ramban's treatment of *kedoshim tihyu* is remarkably similar. Here, too, specific statutes regarding intimacy and food spell out what is prohibited and what is permissible. Here as well these laws are not comprehensive enough. They leave ample room for missing the ethic of the mitzvah system. A person can keep well within those laws, and still remain a "glutton within the law." *kedoshim tihyu* demands that we police ourselves, insuring that we fly high above the storm clouds of physical excess.

Chazal had their own names for each of the five *chumashim*. We would have expected that Bereishis' name would reflect some aspect of "beginning" - creation, birth of humanity, or birth of the Jewish people. Curiously, Chazal[5] called Bereishis *Sefer HaYashar*. We might provide an explanation by way of answering a familiar question. Many have asked why the Torah does not

explicitly prohibit bad character traits, especially since banishing them is of such high priority. The answer may be that it does; that this is precisely the function of Bereishis!

Bereishis can be seen as a law book, as legislating not by statute but by example. The narratives in the early part of the Chumash demonstrate the pitfalls of bad *midos*. Kayin's downfall came through jealousy. The generation of the Flood needed to be wiped off the face of the earth because it had capitulated to lust and desire. The builders of the Tower of Babel allowed the pursuit of honor run away with itself, and with their very lives.<sup>[6]</sup> The story of Sedom shows us the consequences of cruelty; we learn to recoil from bad character through the stories of Esav, Lavan, and Shechem.

We also learn in Bereishis how good should supplant the evil we avoid. This is the overarching theme of the lives of the *avos*. We see them begin the long process of *tikun*, with Avraham instructing us about *chesed*, and Yitzchok and Yaakov demonstrating *gevurah* and *tifferes*. Yosef teaches us about *yesod*, the positive *midah* that incorporates all the others.

All of this - the rejection of evil, and the embrace of proper *midos* under the banner of constantly pursuing what is right and good - was in place before Hashem reached out to *Klal Yisrael* with a nudge from Above, propelling them to a plane on which they could receive the Torah. While this final boost came through Divine prodding, they were expected to first arrive at a different point on their own power - the point at which they could properly be called Jewish. They succeeded at this, but only because they took the path charted by the *avos*. No other path could have gotten them there. Bereishis, therefore, can be seen as the story of preparing the way for the kabbolas haTorah that follows in Shemos. Calling Bereishis Sefer HaYashar makes eminent sense. It sums up the mission of the *avos* - transmitting the essential qualities of Jewishness to their descendants.

Every Jew individually must travel the same route. Our Jewishness is conferred upon us if we are born to the right parents. We have no say in this, nor do we earn it. On the other hand, if we wish to view ourselves as essentially Jewish by dint of our own activity, there is no way other than to take on the *midos* and the pursuit of the right and good that characterized our forefathers.

Further scrutinizing the phrase "right and good," we realize that the Torah speaks of two very different pursuits. *Yashar*, right, refers to our relationship with others, and with Hashem Himself. "Good" in our context refers to *kedushah*. (We noted above that *kedushah* is linked to *yesod*. Shortcomings in the *midah* of *yesod* are often referred to simply as "bad." It follows that the perfection of this *midah* should be called "good.")

We now understand why the list of 613 mitzvos does not include these signposts of Jewish living that we have discussed here. These pursuits define the mission and purpose of Jewish living; they make us fully Jewish. Jews are commanded to perform mitzvos, but there is no mitzvah to become a Jew. *V'asisa yayashar vehatov* is what gets us there.

[1] Based on Nesivos Shalom, vol. 1, pgs. 137-139

[2] Introduction, sections 2-3

[3] Devarim 6:18

[4] Vayikra 19:

[5] Avodah Zarah 25A

[6] For a fuller development of this theme, see the essay on Parshas Bereishis

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