

# TRUTH AND A PLACE CALLED KUSHTA

*by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann*

*Tzedek, tzedek tirdof - Righteousness, righteousness you shall pursue. (16:20)*

How does one pursue tzedek/righteousness? Rashi sees this as a command to pursue civil justice - "Seek reliable civil courts [for your litigation]." Targum Onkelos has an unusual understanding of this pasuk (verse); he sees it as a call for honesty and integrity: "Kushta, kushta tirdof - Truthfulness, truthfulness you shall pursue."

Making use of the Targum's explanation, the continuation of the pasuk connects beautifully to its beginning. The Talmud (Sanhedrin 97a) tells the following story:

Rava said: At first I thought there was no truth in this world. [Then] a certain Torah scholar (some say his name was Rav Tavus, some say his name was Rav Tavyumi) told me that even were he given all the riches of the world, he would never lie. [He then told me the following story:] Once I came to a certain place, which was called Kushta (Truth), where the people never lied, and no one ever died young. I married a woman from Kushta, and bore from her two children.

One day, when my wife was washing herself, a neighbour came knocking on the door [looking for my wife]. I thought, "It's not appropriate [to say what she's doing]," so I told her, "She's not home." Both his children died. The townspeople came to investigate. They said to him: What happened? He told them. They said to him, "With all due respect, please leave our city, and do not bring [untimely] death upon us!"

Tzedek, tzedek tirdof - Truth, truth (Kushta) you shall pursue: Lema'an tichyeh - That you may live!

The Torah's use of double wording (Tzedek, tzedek) for emphasis, as well as its unusual instructions to **pursue** truth, give strength to Onkelos' interpretation. In regards to lying and falsehood the Torah warns: Mi-devar sheker tirchak - Distance yourself from words of falsehood (Shemos 23:7). Judging from its choice of imperatives, it is evident the Torah holds honesty and truthfulness in very high esteem.

Why is truthfulness and honesty so important? I once saw a penetrating insight from the Chassidic giant R' Pinchus of Koritz regarding this. It is told that R' Pinchus used to warn his disciples: "Never fool yourselves! Above all a Jew must be thoroughly honest with himself!"

Once one of his students challenged him. "But Rebbe," he said, "one who fools himself actually thinks he is being honest with himself. So how are we ever to know if we are being honest, or just

fooling ourselves?"

"You have asked wisely, my son," the Rebbe said. "The answer, however, is simple. It is written in Tanna d-Bei Eliyahu (an ancient Midrashic source) that anyone who is careful to speak words of truth, will be sent a malach (an angel) who shows him the truth. One who speaks words of sheker (falsehood) will be sent a malach who fools and deceives him. So, if you will be careful to always tell the truth, you will never 'fool yourself'. If not, well..."

This is a very telling incident. One can live his/her entire life in deception - of others and of himself, and not have even the faintest notion he is doing so.

R' Pinchus also used to tell his disciples: "It is better to choke, than to utter a lie." Taken out of context, this seems like a very strong statement. If, however, the quality of one's life - his perception of himself and of the world around him and of the truth - are directly tied to his own level of honesty, then it begins to make sense. A life spent deceiving oneself is a life hardly worth living. He was telling his disciples: Rather be truthful and bear the consequences than be deceitful and lose touch with life.

Perhaps, based on this, Rashi's interpretation that our pasuk deals with the pursuit of competent batei din (civil courts) and Onkelos' understanding that it deals with the pursuit of truth and honesty, are related. No one is more in need of an unbiased and truthful view of the world than the dayan (judge). Onkelos is telling us that the first prerequisite to being a good dayan is being a man of honesty and truth. Justice, justice you shall pursue. How? Truth, truth you shall pursue.

The quality of truth in our times is sorely in need of improvement. Rabbi Peysach Krohn tells the story of the man who purchased a hat in a Boro Park store. A few days later, he returned there to have his initials stamped into the hat. The owner recognized him as the man who had bought the hat a few days earlier, and promptly gave him five dollars. "I'm so glad you came back," he said. "After you bought your hat, we received a notice from the supplier that we had been quoted the wrong price, and the hats were actually cheaper than we were first told. I had charged you based on the wrong price. The actual price should have been five dollars less!" The man's joy at being able to do the right and honest thing was tangible.

Rabbi Krohn was so excited by this rare display of truthfulness and honesty that he immediately called Rabbi Noson Scherman, a close friend of his, to tell him the story. Listening to the story, R' Scherman responded insightfully, "Isn't it sad that we live in a generation for which this is such a rare and beautiful story!"

By striving to be honest, truthful people, we will be blessed with the rare quality of truthful insight. As we pray every day, "Give truth to Yaakov (Michah 7:20)!" And do you know what? - It actually feels good to throw all the deception and craftiness away and just be truthful.

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