Doing the Good and the Right: Thoughts for Parashat Re'eh

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Re'eh

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"...for you will do that which is good and right in the eyes of the Lord..."

In several places, the Torah reminds us of the general commandment to do that which is good and right in the eyes of the Lord. This is often understood to refer to the proper observance of mitzvot, and the requirement to act "lifnim mi-shurat ha-din" i.e. to behave even more compassionately than demanded by the strict letter of the law. Since the mitzvot are a reflection of God's wisdom and mercy, they should be fulfilled in a spirit of wisdom and mercy.

Rabbi Benzion Uziel, late Sephardic Chief Rabbi of Israel, commented on the seeming dilemma which confronts the rabbinic judge (Introduction to Mishpetei Uziel, 5700). "Righteousness and justice, compassion and truth--these concepts exist simultaneously, as difficult as this is to comprehend. The fundamental teaching of the law of justice is that one may not show compassion in justice, but should uphold the law whatever the consequences. On the other hand, we are taught to do that which is good and upright, and we may compel behavior which is beyond the letter of the law."

Rabbi Uziel notes that the rabbinic judge must balance these seemingly conflicting claims. A decision must be reached that reflects both truth and compassion. The halakha must not only be right--it must be good. In his own writings, Rabbi Uziel reflected a profound commitment to truth, and an overwhelming commitment to compassion. His rabbinic rulings are classic models of halakhic decision-making. He understood that the halakha must relate to real human beings in real life situations; halakha is not a set of abstract rules to be observed by sectarians and ascetics.

In one of his lectures many years ago, Rabbi Ovadya Yosef referred to two tendencies in religious life. One is "gevurah"--heroism. This tendency is marked by the desire to adopt as many stringencies as possible to demonstrate how self-sacrificing one can be in fulfilling the mitzvot. Followers of the "gevurah" approach draw on the strictest halakhic views, even when there are much more cogent and sensible views available within halakha. They prefer extreme positions, thinking that stringency is equated with greater religiosity.

The second tendency is "hessed"--compassion. This tendency is marked by the desire to deal with halakha in a humane, loving and kind manner. Religion should reflect lovingkindness, a profound sympathy for the human predicament, an optimism that God loves us. Followers of the "hessed" approach shun extremism and unnecessary stringencies. Rabbi Yosef comes down on the side of "hessed", indicating that this was the quality that characterized the School of Hillel, whose opinions were accepted over those of the School of Shammai.

Surely one must fulfill mitzvot carefully; but just as surely, one must fulfill them in a spirit of joy and compassion. The mitzvot were given to bring us happiness and spiritual fulfillment, not to serve as a constant source of fear and spiritual inadequacy. Excessive stringency is no more a sign of true religiosity than excessive leniency.

We are called upon to do that which is good and right in the eyes of God. This is a tremendous challenge--and an honor. It entails the fulfillment of the teachings of the Torah in a spirit of truth and compassion, but favoring the tendency to "hessed".

Angel for Shabbat