Righteousness Is Not Enough: Thoughts for Parashat Ekev

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Ekev

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In this week's Torah portion, we are reminded that God does justice on behalf of the orphan and the widow; He loves the stranger and provides food and clothing (Devarim 10:18). The implication is that we, too, should emulate these compassionate qualities of the Almighty, caring for those who need our assistance and protection.

The theme of God's mercy is echoed in Psalm 146. In listing His attributes, the Psalm states that God "provides justice for the oppressed; He gives food to the hungry; He frees those who are bound; He gives sight to the blind; He raises those who are bowed." But then, surprisingly, the Psalmist adds the phrase "God loves the righteous," and then goes on to state that "God watches over strangers and upholds the orphan and widow." The pattern of the above phrases is to describe a person who has a deficiency (e.g. is oppressed, hungry, bound, blind, bowed, in the weak social position of stranger, orphan or widow)—and then to indicate that God resolves the deficiency and restores the person to fullness.

The only exception to this pattern is the phrase that "God loves the righteous". What is that phrase doing in the midst of these descriptions? (Logically, it should be connected to a later phrase that God "thwarts the way of the wicked." Yet, it is not so placed in our Psalm.)

I would suggest that the phrase should be interpreted in the same pattern as the other phrases in which it is included. Just as in the other phrases, it refers to a human deficiency which the Almighty comes to heal. What is the deficiency of the righteous? The lack of love! Since the righteous lacks love, God fills this deficiency by showering love upon the righteous.

This can be understood in two ways. A righteous person—since she/he has high principles—is not always a beloved person. People don't necessarily like others who are righteous, seeing them rather as being self-righteous. Or they don't like righteous people who seem to stand in criticism of the lifestyles and opinions of others. Since a righteous person might feel lonely and unloved, he/she should take comfort in the fact that the Almighty will love him/her. That Divine love makes up for the deficiency of human love that he/she experiences.

I would suggest a second interpretation—not that the righteous are deprived of the love of others, but that the righteous lack the ability to love others! A righteous person follows the rules carefully, and does that which is right. In being committed to these rules, he/she might become disdainful of others who aren't quite as meticulous. The righteous person becomes characterized by love of the rules, not by love of fellow human beings. Indeed, those people who do not conform to his/her standards of righteousness become objects of scorn or disgust.

The Talmud relates a strange passage about a father who prays on behalf of his ailing son. If the father says that he will give charity if God will heal the son, the father is considered to be totally righteous. Yet, this prayer seems to be less than ideal. Why should the father be considered to be righteous by making a bargain with God? Rabbi HayyimYosef David Azulai, one of the great sages of the 18th century, commented on this Talmudic passage. He stated: the father is considered righteous—but not pious! He is righteous in that he strikes a bargain and meets its terms exactly. He has not deviated from the rules. Yet, he is not pious—his attitude reflects a low level of religiosity. It lacks true love of God.

A righteous person might not even realize that righteousness is insufficient to make one a good person, a religious person. A righteous person can be cold, calculating, unsympathetic to others—and still be following the rules meticulously. Such a person is lacking in piety—in love of God and love of fellow human beings. Such a person is devoted to the rules, but is not devoted to living by ideals that deepen and transcend the rules. The righteous person lacks love.

Thus, the Psalm lists the deficiency of the righteous as a deficiency of love—a deficiency in his/her ability to live with a loving attitude toward God and human beings. So God must intercede and teach the righteous person to love.

When the Bible describes God's love and compassion and His concern for the weak and downtrodden, it is presenting a model for emulation. Just as He is kind, so we are to be kind; just as He is merciful, so are we to be merciful. The essence of religion is not merely doing that which is right—but doing that which is imbued

with compassion and love.

Our goal is not merely to be righteous—but to be pious. To be pious entails the qualities of empathy, compassion—and sincere love.

Angel for Shabbat