The Pursuit of Righteousness: Thoughts for Parashat Shofetim

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Shofetim

by Rabbi Marc D. Angel

Professor Gershom Scholem wrote: “The Jewish mystic lives and acts in perpetual rebellion against a world with which he strives with all his zeal to be at peace” (Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism, p. 34). I think this statement is true not only of mystics, but of all truly religious individuals.

On the one hand, a religious person wants to live in harmony with God and humanity. He/she seeks a world in which the ideals of compassion, justice and truth are fully honored and obeyed. On the other hand, a religious person inevitably finds him/herself in rebellion against the rampant falsehood, cruelty and hypocrisy which characterize society. There is a horrible rift between the ideal and the real, and this rift tears at the soul of every truly religious individual.

The essential rift is not between the religious and the secular; it is between the righteous and the unrighteous. There are people who identify as “secular” but who live righteous, upstanding lives. There are people who identify as “religious” but who live unrighteous, immoral lives. Indeed, truly religious people are often most deeply pained when confronting moral turpitude among those who claim to be religious.

We expect—rightly—that people who present themselves as faithful adherents to Torah should live exemplary lives that set an example of righteousness and compassion. How painful it is to learn of “religious” individuals who engage in criminal activity, in child molestation, in spousal abuse. How disillusioning it is to confront “religious” teachers and leaders who display vile personality traits—arrogance, egotism, cruelty and self-righteousness.

To be religious means to serve God and humanity in righteousness, compassion and goodness. To be religious means to be honest, kind and thoughtful. Anyone who lacks these qualities is not “religious,” no matter how careful he/she is in ritual observance.

This week's Torah portion instructs us to appoint judges and officers who will ensure righteous judgment in our communities. "Justice, justice shall you pursue" (Devarim 16:20). This passage has often been interpreted to mean that we should be thoroughly imbued with justice. We should pursue justice only through just means, and we should never think that "righteous" ends can be achieved through "unrighteous" behavior.

This applies not merely to judges, but to all human beings. Our behavior should be pure, just as our inner lives should strive for purity. Truly religious people are not only troubled by the corruption and evils in our society; they strive to eliminate these corruptions and evils. They strive to improve themselves, their families, their communities, and society at large. They understand that the pursuit of righteousness is the foundation of religious life.

Religious people are perpetually in rebellion against a world with which they strive to be at peace. Peace begins with our own inner peace, putting our own spiritual lives in proper order. Once we are strong within ourselves, we can deal with our society with greater courage, honesty and success. The rebellion against evil will be won, one person at a time, one day at a time.