

Dor Hadash Talk  
Friday, July 10, 2020

### **“Justice, Justice Shalt Thou Pursue”**

I am a fan of reading science fiction and fantasy, mystery – just about anything that takes my mind off the world as it is, which I find terribly depressing, especially lately. But my favorite fantasy author, Terry Pratchett, actually has a lot of philosophical observations in addition to imaginative fantasy and laugh-out-loud humor. The theme of one of his novels, *The Hogfather*, is fantasy’s role in the human experience. One of the more poetic things he says in that book is that humans need fantasy to be human – to be the place where the falling angel meets the rising ape. Much could be said about the role that humanity’s ability to imagine worlds other than our own plays in our humanity. But tonight I have a different topic to discuss. One of the characters in the *Hogfather* says, essentially, that children need to have fantasies about the Tooth Fairy and the Easter Bunny so that when they grow up, they can believe in fantasies like justice and mercy. That is a much more cynical view of fantasy as it relates to the human condition.

But is justice a fantasy? Do we dare believe that?

The pursuit of justice plays a central role in Judaism. In Midrash *Devarim Rabbah*, we are told that God loves justice even more than sacrifice. “To do what is right and just is **more** desired by the Lord than sacrifice.” Not equal to, but more than.

And here’s a passage from Amos that is more vehement on the subject:

“I hate, I despise your religious festivals;  
your assemblies are a stench to me.  
Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings,  
I will not accept them.  
Though you bring choice fellowship offerings,  
I will have no regard for them.  
Away with the noise of your songs!  
I will not listen to the music of your harps.  
But let justice roll on like a river,  
righteousness like a never-failing stream!”

There are various reasons given for giving justice precedence over sacrifice:

Sacrifice could only function while the Temple stood in Jerusalem, whereas justice and righteousness were essential during the biblical period and are no less mandated today.

Sacrifices were intended to atone only for unintentional, accidental sins, but acts of righteousness and justice atone even for intentional sins.

Sacrifices are offered only by humanity to God, but even God is obligated to practice justice and righteousness.

We are told in the Torah, in Shoftim, that judgment must be fair, that judges are not to take bribes or show partiality. One example of the way in which justice is to be rendered is that no person can be subjected to death by stoning without the evidence of at least two witnesses, and those witnesses must be the first to cast the stones. These requirements are apparently intended to insure first, that one person with a grudge cannot condemn anyone to death on his or her own word; and second, that the witnesses against the offender must truly believe that the offender is guilty and deserves this punishment. Otherwise, hopefully, they would hesitate to cast stones rather than be haunted by not only the knowledge that they condemned an innocent person to death but also by the physical memory of throwing the stones.

The most famous quotation from this parsha is, “Justice, justice shalt thou pursue”, which is a fairly literal translation of the Hebrew.

There are many inferences to be drawn from the way this statement is made.

It is a commandment, not a choice. It is phrased in the imperative – you **will** pursue justice.

The word “justice” is repeated to emphasize its importance. More than anything else, **justice** is what you must focus on.

Justice is not described as a personal thing, but as something that is to be practiced everywhere in the community. An injustice to one is an injustice to all.

And finally, we must **pursue** it – it doesn’t just sit there waiting for us to grasp it. We have to be active in seeking it.

Some say that the Torah’s emphasis on justice stems in part from the Jewish experience as slaves in Egypt. How, then, can we ignore the plight of the former slaves here in our own country? Have we been doing enough to right the wrongs that slavery imposed on the descendants of the African slaves who were brought to this country centuries ago? We must pursue justice for them, to do whatever we can do to ensure that our black neighbors are receiving the full benefits of citizenship in this country, or else we are ignoring God’s commandment.

We know that people have been fighting for this goal since before the United States was founded. We know that despite the progress that has been made, beginning with the Emancipation Proclamation, through *Brown v. Board of Education* and Title VII, there is still such a long way to go. But as the Torah says, justice is something that must be **pursued**. Maybe Terry Pratchett is right, in the real world justice can never be completely achieved and so is in a way a fantasy, but we are nevertheless obligated to pursue it always.

The Torah tells us that how we treat the weakest in our midst – characterized there as the “widow” and the “orphan” – tells us who we are. We are responsible for trying to correct any injustice that exists in our society, whether or not it affects us directly. This is not to say that it is only people of

color in this country who are targeted for oppression and violence. We do not need to be reminded about those who would continue to make us targets as Jews. In order to pursue justice, we must continue to pursue a world in which people do not create divisions and cultivate fear based on differences in color, background, culture or religion. Only in that way can we approach universal justice.

Race is an artificial construct. Culture and religion are social variations. We are all members of the human race. We need to seek justice for every one of its members. We know this is right, and we should do it because we know it is right. But we also **must** do it in order to be Jews.