

D'var Torah: Parashat Re'eh

by Benjamin Gee - Wednesday, August 28, 2019

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A just society depends on each one of our actions...

Do you know another name for Sefer Devarim - the Book of Deuteronomy?

It is derived from a word in parashat Re'eh: "Ki ta'ase ha'tov v'hayashar b'inei Hashem Elokeicha - When you do that which is good and right in the eyes of the Lord your God".

Rabbi Elazar in the Gemara, masechet Avoda Zara (daf hei, amud aleph), tells us that another name for Devarim is 'Sefer Hayashar', the book of integrity - the book of doing the right thing. And it comes from that word, 'hayashar' - we must do what is good and 'yashar' - what is right, in the eyes of Hashem.

The Torah Temimah comments on how extraordinary it is that a whole book can take its title not from the first word, but from a key word right in the middle of it. So therefore this term 'hayashar' must be extremely special. And the Torah Temimah says yes, it does make a lot of sense, because in the Gemara masechet Shabbat, (daf lamud aleph, amud aleph) Hillel teaches us that the essence of the whole Torah is 'love your neighbour as you love yourself'. Don't do unto others that which you wouldn't want them to do to you. This is the whole Torah he says, and the rest is all commentary.

When it comes to what I would like for myself - I want to have a good life and I also want justice - I want to be treated fairly. Therefore, I should be good and fair to others. As a result therefore, carrying out 'ha'tov v'hayashar' is a key component of the entire Torah, and it can justifiably be included as the title of one of the books of the Torah.

Indeed it is human nature that, from the earliest age, we have a keen sense of justice. That cry of a child - 'it's not fair' is familiar to every single household where there are young children because we all demand fairness in our lives.

However, there is a problem with the concept of fairness because what I might consider to be fair, might not be fair in your eyes - and that is why in the Bible, in the Book of Judges we are told there was a period in which 'ish kol hayashar b'ainav ya'aseh' - people would do what was fair in their own eyes, and that led to the destabilisation of the nation.

Therefore the Alshich tells us that we need to consider the last few words in our verse in Parashat Re'eh - Ki ta'ase ha'tov v'hayashar b'inei Hashem Elokeicha - when you do what is good and what is fair in the eyes of the Lord your God" - Hashem instructs us, via the Torah, as to what is just and what is fair, and as a result, we have a guide to true justice and we can dispense goodness and do what is fair for the sake of others. From the Sefer Hayashar - The book of Integrity, we can ultimately achieve goodness and fairness not just for ourselves, but for all around us.

Shabbat Shalom

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