

The Challah With the Inferiority Complex?

tzedek tzedek tirdof, examined

צֶדֶק צֶדֶק תִּרְדּוֹף

(Devarim 16:20)

“Righteousness, righteousness shall you pursue.”

Parshas Shoftim opens with the command to establish an ethical judicial system, and within that command the Torah writes *tzedek tzedek tirdof* — righteousness, righteousness you shall pursue. Why the repetition?

The meforshim explain that the double wording is teaching us something specific: we must pursue righteousness *with* righteousness. In other words, the ends do not justify the means.

Imagine someone walked into a supermarket and shoplifted bread and milk to feed a poor family. Would the good intention make the theft ethical? Of course not. The cause may be noble, but the act is still wrong. Halacha is not only concerned with the goal itself, but with the means used to reach it. The Torah is telling us: you want *tzedek*? You may only pursue it through *tzedek*.

There is a well-known question the meforshim raise: if the Avos kept the entire Torah before it was given, how could Yaakov Avinu marry two sisters, Rochel and Leah?

Rav Yaakov Kamenetsky offers a powerful answer. Yaakov Avinu was never commanded against marrying two sisters — the Torah had not yet been given to Klal Yisroel — so for him this was a personal chumra, not a Torah obligation. But he had given Rochel his word that he would marry her. Lavan's trickery in substituting Leah did not nullify that promise. Yaakov reasoned: I gave Rochel my word — how can I violate it? The choice came down to his personal chumra or his word, and his word prevailed, even at the cost of his own stringency.

***“A person is entitled to be machmir on himself —
but not at the expense of the people he loves.”***

That is *tzedek tzedek tirdof* in action. A person is entitled to be machmir on himself, but he must consider how that stringency affects the people around him. If others suffer as a result, it is not a chumra at all.

A simple example: someone has a chumra not to eat or drink anything outside the sukkah, not even a sip of water. He takes his family to an amusement park on Chol HaMoed Sukkos, and as the day wears on he grows hungry, thirsty, and irritable — and takes it out on his wife and children. That is misplaced

righteousness. It is wonderful to perform mitzvos with the greatest hiddurim, but not at the expense of the people we love. We cannot step over others while chasing our own righteousness.

Rav Shraga Feivel Mendlowitz, founder of Yeshiva Torah Vodaas, once spent a Shabbos in Miami at the home of a former talmid. The young man walked his rebbi home from shul Friday night, and when he opened the door, he was mortified. His wife, exhausted after a full week of raising children and running the home, was stretched out on the couch. The Shabbos table wasn't fully set; the dishes sat in a pile near the becher and the wine. At the head of the table stood two large challos, left uncovered.

The custom is to cover the challos before Kiddush, since the beracha on wine is normally said after the beracha on bread, and leaving the bread “waiting” uncovered is treated as a small, symbolic affront to the bread — hence the cover. Mortified, the talmid turned to his wife and, in a demeaning tone, told her to finish setting the table properly. Then, turning to his rebbi, he said, “I’m sure leaving the challos uncovered was just an oversight — everyone knows we’re supposed to cover the challah before Kiddush,” clearly trying to shift his own embarrassment onto her.

Rav Shraga Feivel was troubled by his talmid's self-righteousness and told him: “Over the years, countless students, couples, and people from every walk of life have come into my office to share their personal struggles with me. Not once has a challah walked into my office with an inferiority complex because it was left uncovered during Kiddush. Do you know why? Because we were never really concerned about the challah's feelings. The whole point of covering the challah is to train *us* in sensitivity — to the feelings of real people. How, then, can you embarrass your wife over an uncovered challah, when the entire purpose of that halacha is to make you *more* sensitive, not less?”

That is the very antithesis of *tzedek tzedek tirdof*.

The Chazon Ish, known for his own exacting chumras, once remarked that when Moshiach comes there will be a great seudah, and the main course will offer a choice: meat from the Shor HaBor, or fish from the Livyasan. Someone asked him why there would even be a fish option, when the alternative is a rich, juicy steak from the Shor HaBor. The Chazon Ish answered: because even then, there will be people who say, “We’re frum, we keep a chumra, we don’t eat meat” — never mind that it’s Hashem’s own meat, from His own shechita. “No, thank you,” they’ll say. “I’ll have the fish.” Misguided frumkeit, taken to its logical extreme.

Rav Yisroel Salanter was once asked what the most important hiddur is when baking matzos for Pesach. His answer: not to raise your voice at the almanos doing the baking.

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— *Personified*