



DVAR TZEDEK

Parshat Va'etchanan 5772

By Rabbi Wendi Geffen

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Many assert that helping non-Jews in developing countries isn't a Jewish thing to do. They argue that while pursuing betterment for all takes nothing away from living Jewishly, such pursuits are not dictated by Jewish law. They interpret Jewish imperatives like caring for the orphan, the widow and the stranger, or loving one's neighbor as one's self, with a notably particularistic lens, claiming that the Torah refers to the *Jewish* orphan and the *Jewish* neighbor. To this camp, publications like *Dvar Tzedek* can be perceived as shallow attempts to claim modern global concerns as authentic Jewish practice.

At first, *Parshat Va'etchanan* seems to justify these claims. The portion states that following the *mitzvot* is the key to living a good Jewish life, and the definition of how to do so is strikingly narrow. At the culmination of the reiteration of the 10 Commandments, the text warns:

Be careful, then, to do as Adonai your God has commanded you. Do not turn aside to the right or the left: follow only the path that Adonai your God has enjoined upon you....¹

This seemingly clear admonition against straying from the letter of the law appears to justify the critique that advocating for equal rights for LGBTBI citizens in Uganda or sending aid to earthquake victims in Haiti, while nice things to do, are not mandated by the Torah. But if you continue reading, a brief statement towards the end of the *parashah* opens a window to a wider definition of the law:

You should surely keep the *mitzvah* of Adonai your God;
God's testimonies and statutes that God commanded you.
You should do what is *hatov v'hayashar* (good and right) in the eyes of God...²

At face value, the third line merely seems to reiterate the first two, emphasizing the importance of following God's commandments. Most commentators, however, reject the apparent redundancy in these verses, concluding that the injunction "to do what is *hatov v'hayashar*—good and right" offers a new way to understand "commandedness": as something *beyond* following each *mitzvah* in its specific articulation.

Nachmanides asserts that doing "good and right" applies "even in regard to those things where no specific Divine commandment applies, since God loves that which is good and upright."³ He goes on to explain the impossibility of documenting and addressing every aspect of human behavior through the *mitzvot*, and concludes that "... God included a general injunction to do that which is good and upright in every matter, accepting where necessary even a compromise in a legal dispute and going beyond the letter of the law."

¹ Deuteronomy 5:29-30.

² Deuteronomy 6:17-18.

³ Ramban on Deuteronomy 6:18.

Ramban's statement stresses that the Torah could not anticipate every situation. Therefore, no matter how many *mitzvot* there are, they can never encompass all of our experiences and encounters. As such, a person's actions must necessarily model "*hatov v'hayashar*" in order to live a good Jewish life, because not to do so would go against God's desires.

Maimonides concretizes this idea when he addresses the fact that Torah law permits a Jew to have his non-Jewish slave perform hard labor, while he is forbidden to do so for the Jewish slave.⁴ Taking issue with this distinction, he critiques: "Although this is the law, the attribute of piety and the way of wisdom is for a person to be merciful and to pursue justice."⁵ As such, Rambam not only reinforces the idea that there is a greater good beyond the letter of the law, but he mandates that Jews must apply the same principles of dignity and justice to our treatment of those outside our community that we do when interacting with those within it.

Combining Ramban's interpretation of *hatov v'hayashar* with Rambam's practical application provides us with a compelling argument that Jewish sources indeed endorse and mandate our global justice pursuits. In fact, nearly all of the commentaries⁶ on "*hatov v'hayashar*" relate it to a moral/ethical component of how we treat people who are disadvantaged economically when we sit in a position of power over them. And Ramban's understanding that the Torah could not possibly have anticipated every situation and reality helps us expand our ethical responsibility to include those living in all corners of the globe. Simply because the Torah could not envision a globalized world—where our actions can have an impact thousands of miles away—does not mean that it doesn't mandate our responsibility to all who live in it. Doing "what is good and right," regardless of whether there is a stated *mitzvah* for a particular situation, teaches that rectifying social and economic stratification and equalizing society—whether the society is Jewish or not, in our borders or not—is authentically and organically part of what it means to live Jewishly.

By offering us the principle of *ha-tov v'hayashar*, doing what is good and right, whether or not it is explicitly commanded in the Torah or rabbinic literature, *Parashat Va'etchanan* provides a persuasive argument that publications like this one are not simply self-serving efforts to find justifications for global *tzedek* in traditional texts. Rather, they are elucidating the deepest and most timeless truths of our tradition—the responsibility to act in accordance with Divine will to protect the dignity of all of God's creations.



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⁴ See Leviticus 25:46.

⁵ Rambam, Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Avadim 9:8.

⁶ See Babylonian Talmud, Bava Metzia 83a, for example.

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