

Righteousness We Shall Pursue

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In just a few weeks, we will once again turn to our High Holy Day liturgy for inspiration and guidance during this season of renewal and return. Perhaps one of the highlights of this liturgy is the passage about the Book of Life. We say that God will inscribe each of our names into these pages, decreeing the destiny we are to live out in the year to come. And then we say in Hebrew, "*U'teshuvah, u'tefillah, u'tzedakah ma'avirin ro'ah ha-gezerah*." "But repentance, prayer, and charity temper judgment's severe decree."

Commentators and rabbis have insightfully noted the deep theological difficulties inherent in this line. Are we really to believe that the deeds of repentance, prayer, and charity can prevent misfortune from befalling us? And did those who are currently suffering somehow fall short of some requisite amount of repentance, prayer, or charity?

Despite its troubling nature, we will certainly continue to sing this familiar and iconic line as we worship together, lifting up the importance of being personally aware of our misdoings over the past year, our ongoing intentions that may bring us closer to God, and our obligation to be generous with others and with ourselves. In doing so, we may be able to place ourselves in the path of righteousness.

In this week's Torah portion, *Shoftim*, we encounter one of the most well-known phrases within our Torah: *Tzedek, Tzedek, Tirdof*. "Justice, Justice, you shall pursue." Our portion outlines the necessity for a just court system and our responsibility to ensure that one's judgment for any crime be fair. What stands out in this phrase is the repetition of the word *tzedek*, which translates to "justice." Some of us may know that the word *tzedek* derives from the root *tzade-dalet-kuf*, the same root that shapes words such as *tzadik* and *tzedakah*. All of these words connect with the ideas of justice, fairness, and charity, but even more so, they connect with the concept of righteousness.

As we approach our Days of Awe, a more appropriate translation of *Tzedek, Tzedek, Tirdof* may be, "Righteousness, Righteousness, you shall pursue." And, while we need not forget the importance of advocating for what is right and good for others, the righteousness we speak about during the High Holy Days is one that is also directed towards ourselves. For when we recite the words of the *Un'taneh Tokef*, reading the words, "*U'teshuvah, u'tefillah, u'tzedakah ma'avirin ro'ah ha-gezerah*," *tzedakah* may not refer simply to charitable giving, but it may suggest that we give to ourselves that which we are instructed to give to others: fair judgment.

We all have heard of the notion of being one's own worst critic, one's own worst judge. The ethical and moral standard that we set for ourselves can be difficult to reach. That is not to say that we are unable to meet our own personal standards and expectations, but that we can sometimes be extremely harsh with

ourselves. While much of our tradition teaches us that severe and harsh judgment awaits us from God, we seemingly put ourselves on trial and, at times, unforgivingly declare a verdict by which we choose our own emotional suffering.

Just as repentance, prayer, and charity may temper God's decree, our own awareness of and generosity and compassion towards ourselves may lessen our own degrees of judgment. For a path of righteousness does not mean that we are blameless or without fault, but that we have taken an honest and often difficult accounting of who and what we have become. Awareness leads us to acknowledge the many ways in which we have not fulfilled our promises, have avoided our responsibilities, and have let ourselves down. The essential task of the High Holy Days is to repair our own brokenness so we can be restored to wholeness, to be generous in forgiving ourselves for our misdeeds, softening our hearts which can sometimes grow very hard.

Righteousness, righteousness, we shall pursue—and in doing so, we certainly will move closer to becoming our best selves. May we all be blessed with insight and God's guidance as we seek to place ourselves on the path of righteousness this season—and return again to a place of wholeness and peace. Shabbat Shalom.