



Parashat Shoftim

Doubling the Weight of Our Words

by Cantor David E. Reinwald on Friday August 21, 2009

1 Elul

Deuteronomy 16:18 - 21:9

The only way I can describe how one approaches *Parashat Shoftim* is with honor, as this portion surrounds itself in such ideals. I find that while there is so much to grapple with in this portion, it was that one famous quote that was drawing me nearer and nearer as I leafed through the text, but turned back to every time. *Tzedek tzedek tirdof*, (Deuteronomy 16:20) a quote which I have seen so many times written on posters for rallies of protest for social justice and which is commonly translated as “Justice, justice shall you pursue.”

As it is for so many, the repetition of the word *tzedek* is for me a continually intriguing notion. I marvel at the Torah’s ability to say so much in so few words. Yet, we continually find ourselves digging incredibly deep to search for meaning in doubled words. I immediately thought of another famous instance in the Torah amidst the *Akeidah* where the repetition of words is essential. God cries out to Abraham, “*Avraham Avraham*,” a call to immediate action for Abraham that changes the course of everything to follow. It made me wonder if *tzedek tzedek* is a similar cry out to us in our own pursuit of justice.

I sought to see how else this had been translated. By Everett Fox, I found not “justice” but “equity,” seeming to more greatly define the implications of justice. In Christian translations, the Revised Authorized translation writes, “That which is altogether just, shalt thou follow,” adding a dimension of quality to this understanding. While in the New English Bible one finds, “justice, and justice alone,” point blank. The late medieval rabbi *Rav Bachya ben Asher* commented in like fashion, “The double emphasis means: Justice under any circumstance, whether to your profit or loss, whether in word or in action, whether to Jew or non-Jew. It also means: Do not use unjust means to secure justice.” The Talmud guides us to apply justice to any judgment or compromise. Perhaps this is the simplest, yet most powerful suggestion. We hardly live in a black-and-white world, and we have to always see both sides of the situation, especially when we are caught in that gray reality.

But back to language. We cannot deny how moving a talented orator can be or the destructive nature of demeaning language. This is all connected to the choice of words. In my perusing, I found a surprise in the words of Isaiah in this week’s Haftarah. It was our prophets who best



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understood the value of their words as motivators of our people through their lofty and poetic speech. And in this week's Haftarah we find not one, but four pairs of repeated words. "*Anochi, Anochi*," (51:12) as Isaiah takes up the post of speaking God's words proclaiming "I, I am the one who comforts you." Then, "*Hitor'ri, Hitor'ri*" (51:17) the first of the three calls to action as Isaiah implores Jerusalem to "rouse yourself," followed by "*Uri, Uri*" (52:1), a call for Jerusalem to awaken itself to new heights. Isaiah concludes with "*Suru, Suru*" (52:11) for Jerusalem to depart from its past and move forward to new days of redemption. I imagine it was so beautiful to hear these words spoken, and they were notably also an inspiration to the Kabbalists who modernized and built upon these themes, making the "*Hitor'ri*" and "*Uri*" repetitions part of the prayer *Lecha Dodi*.

We can once again modernize this call for ourselves to continue moving forward in our own fight for justice as LGBT Jews. We need to summon all we can to rouse and awaken the minds of those who stand in our way. We can help them to depart from their shackles of homophobia or hatred to move toward the light of the pursuit of justice for all.



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