

Psalm 27: *הייתי ה צדק ונתתי באורתי מישור למען שוררי*

Beautiful, but difficult. First, isn't *צדק* the same as *אורתי מישור*?

Second, and more important: *למען שוררי*. Most translators

render: "because of them that lie in wait for me." Dr. Birnbaum

modernizes this succinctly as, "in spite of my enemies." This

follows the interpretation of most commentaries. The idea is that

שוררי comes from the word *שיר*, which means look, i.e., those

who look at me with hatred and wait for me to fail. However, the

verb is not necessarily evil! Moreover, *למען* does not usually

mean "in spite of," but "because of."

Hence, permit this interpretation: *שוררי* means onlookers --

neutral, or even those who look to me for guidance. Hence, David

said: "Teach me Thy way, O Lord," my intentions are noble. But

sometimes man misreads the divine directions, and though he wishes

to walk in the way of the Lord he chooses a road that is crooked and

distorted, one that is misleading. Hence, lead me on the *אורתי מישור*.

Why is that so important? In order not to mislead the onlookers --

למען שוררי, because of the onlookers.

I refer, in this respect, especially to apologetics or *התבונות*,

which have a long and honored history in Judaism. There are three

attitudes with regard to apologetics: a) that the whole function of

a Jew is to explain himself to his non-Jewish peers, and to those of

his brethren who are alienated. Apologetics becomes the supreme

religious activity. What is most important is the articulation of

Judaism in an idiom comprehensible to the non-Jews. b) the second

attitude is diametrically opposed: the commandments and all of

Judaism are theonomous, and require no explanations. We do what we

do only because we are commanded... c) the middle position, to which

I subscribe, is that fundamentally the second opinion is correct: the "service of the Lord" is its own excuse. We do because we are commanded, not because we bring God and Torah before the bar of our esthetic and moral judgment. However, we still are obligated to explain ourselves to others and even to our own selves, to make the commandments more meaningful and purposeful in the context of our own lives existentially.

However, let us concentrate on the first of the two extreme ideas, that of apologetics at all costs. With all the good it has done, it has brought many disadvantages in its wake. Thus, when we came to America, a country which values cleanliness, we picked up a thread that was first spun many many centuries ago, and we began to interpret Kashrut only as health and "family purity" only as medically sound. And then we discovered that people told us that, if that was the case, refrigeration obviates Kashrut, and the glory of America -- plumbing -- makes "family purity" unnecessary. I have heard tzitzit explained as "a badge" of identity. But in that case, who can argue with a young man whose only sign of Jewish identity is a small mezuzah worn on a necklace?...

Most important in this respect: during the summer I was in England and after the Entebbe affair, in which Israel liberated the hostages from Uganda, the London Times was constrained to applaud Israel -- but could not restrain itself from a "jab" by commenting that Israel's action was in keeping with the harsh biblical doctrine of "an eye for an eye," which we find in today's Sidra as well. It reminded me of the New York Times and Time Magazine which, after every time that Israel responded to a terrorist incursion, blamed the "harsh storm God of Israel" (note the residual Christian theological anti-Semitism) who commanded "an eye for an eye." No

matter how often I and others wrote to these media elements, reminding them that the Jewish tradition in its mainstream interprets "an eye for an eye..." as *יָיִם*, as compensation rather than physical retaliation, it did not help. Whose fault is this?

I believe it is our own fault, i.e., those apologists of centuries and centuries ago. It began with Josephus, who took it upon himself to expound Judaism to the then modern Roman world. The Roman world, and its juridical philosophy, had raised the concept of lex talionis to the highest realms. It was therefore important for Josephus to show that Judaism too agrees with this concept. He therefore shaded the truth, in his desire to present God's Torah as acceptable he did not tell the whole story. And he allowed the impression to be made that Judaism interprets the biblical doctrine literally: an eye for an eye...

This was not accurate. Josephus wanted to go "in the way of the Lord," but he failed to take "the path of straightness." His lack of *יְשִׁירֻת דְּרָכָיו* has now returned to plague us for the last 2,000 years!

It is best, in all these matters, to be truthful even if it is unpopular. Robert Ingersol once said that he who is married to the fashion of the hour will soon be a young widow. Intellectual fashions and ideological fads tend to fade out as soon as they arise. It is better, therefore, to tell the whole truth, no matter how unpleasant and uncomfortable, and hope for better days ahead.

In today's Sidra we are told *קָדֵשׁ גִּבּוֹרִים מִדְּבַר אֱלֹהֵי* -- which means truth, justice. In Exodus (*לְבַיִת*), we are told *מִן הַיָּמִים* , which one Hasidic interpreter translates as: according to the times. It is true that we must do both: make Torah relevant to the times we live in -- but, even more important, is to have *קָדֵשׁ גִּבּוֹרִים* , to be absolutely truthful.