

It's Not Enough to Be a Tzaddik

In last week's parashah, Yitro, we saw God's big debut in the world he created. He tears open the heavens, suspending the normal state of the universe so that he can interact personally with humanity. The Israelites are, in some sense, a blank slate. They are ready to accept whatever belief system or philosophy God wants to give them. But instead of giving them a philosophy or belief system, instead of giving them a systematic theology or a creed, Hashem gives laws. Commandments.

And now in Parashat Mishpatim, they really begin to pile on. Laws about slavery and compensation for damages, laws about robbery and self-defense. Lending money, the sabbatical year, pilgrimage festivals. People often refer to the Torah as "the Law" and we are now in the thick of where this name applies best.

It makes sense from a Jewish perspective that Hashem would reveal himself this way because we understand God as maker of covenants. Covenants have terms and promises. Faith, emunah, means dedication and loyalty to a covenant. And we understand Hashem as King. A king is a lawgiver and judge. To be faithful to a king means to show allegiance to him. We understand the Torah and its many laws as the foundation of the nation of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and our civilization as Jewish people. It is the glue that keeps our people together, functioning as a healthy society. So to me, it's not strange at all to introduce a religion with laws, rather than beliefs.

But I'll admit I've been in a bubble lately. I've been off of social media for quite some time, and I have forgotten how other people think. And over the last two months, I rebooted my Twitter account, which is now X. It has shown me what a small, strange world we live in here at Beth Immanuel.

I'm trying to find like-minded people there online, and it's hard. Even among Christians who claim to reject Replacement Theology, they have great difficulty understanding the purpose of the Torah.

For example, one such account posted this leading question:

What is the righteousness that "Exceeds that of the Pharisees", and how does one obtain it?

Of course, he's referring to Yeshua's statement recorded in Matthew 5:20:

For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. (Matthew 5:20)

Taken at face value, this statement is quite problematic for Christian theology. It cannot possibly be that Yeshua really wants us to perform righteous deeds in order to enter the kingdom of heaven. With that interpretation rejected from the outset, what could this declaration possibly mean?

Another account responded, "Jesus is trying to paint us into a corner there. With no way out. Except through Him." And the original poster responded, "Exactly right! In fact, the vast majority of his interactions with people in the gospels are him magnifying the Law to see who will rise up to the challenge, and who will bow down in brokenness."

So in this view, it's all a ruse. The statements where Jesus emphasizes the greatness and importance of keeping the Torah are just there to make us feel more and more guilty for breaking it until we throw up our hands in despair of even trying. Only then we can be saved by faith.

Of course, the difficulty with this interpretation is that Yeshua's statement comes in a context. In the previous three verses, Yeshua declared that the Torah will never pass away, and that one must keep its commandments and teach others to do the same. And in the remaining verses of chapter five, Yeshua identified—with precision—the defects in the observance of the scribes and Pharisees that needed correction. This whole teaching of Yeshua is not mysterious or tricky. It only becomes hard to understand when read through the lens of Replacement Theology.

The Scribes and Pharisees Problem

But while Yeshua's statement is not hard to understand, it is alarming. Your righteousness must exceed that of the Torah scholars and Pharisees? These are religious people. They are the Torah observant community. What could they possibly lack?

Their deficiency is unfortunately relatable to all of us. The subjects of Yeshua's criticism had a hollowed-out shell of a religious identity. It was superficial, on the visible surface of their life. Internally, there was corruption, moral decay, and lack of commitment.

If you have experienced anything like this at times in your life, you know that it is painfully unsatisfying. The cognitive dissonance is a challenge to bear, as you have the constraints of a religious persona, dictating what you can and can't do in public. At the same time, you have none of the benefits of feeling spiritual and close to God. On the contrary, you sense the pointlessness of a life constantly falling short of its spiritual potential.

It's one thing to feel frustrated, dissatisfied, and unspiritual. But the problem is much bigger than this. Our master Yeshua said of someone like this, of a generation like this, "you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."

Entering the kingdom of heaven is our primary directive. "Seek first the kingdom". If this is holding us back, then we have to address it; we have to fix it.

It should be noted that this warning is often misconstrued by people who don't have the tools to interpret it in its Jewish context. Yeshua does not say, "you will not go to heaven when you die." We are not talking about salvation in the Christian sense. Rather, his warning is that you will not "enter the kingdom."

The Kingdom, as we know, is the Messianic era, the culmination of history, when Messiah rules as king of a worldwide theocratic empire as he sits on the throne of his father David in Jerusalem, here on earth. There is world peace, prosperity, and above all, it is permeated by the knowledge and presence of God.

The Guide to our Journey

“How do we get from here to there” is the right question to ask. We have been going through a passage in 2 Peter that provides lights along the way, guiding us to the entrance to the eternal kingdom. This list of qualities is found in 2 Peter 1:5.

The starting point is faith, which we defined as awareness that God not only exists, but he intervenes in history and in our personal lives to redeem.

Next is virtue or excellence, or as we discovered, having a good heart that is calibrated to heaven’s compass, with the ability to see the big picture and calculate the reward for righteousness.

Virtue is followed by knowledge, which is far deeper than the learning of facts. It’s the synthesis of chochmah (raw data) with binah (analysis), bridging the intellect with the emotions until it propels our will into divine service.

After knowledge comes self-control, or conquering the evil inclination. This means taking control of the animal instinct, rejecting its seduction to have you return to the animal kingdom.

Finally, we learned about steadfastness or perseverance. Suffering brings about perfection of the soul, and it means fixing your eyes on the goal and doing your part in what it takes to get there as you rely on Hashem.

That brings us to the next milestone on the journey: one that most translations render as “godliness.” Now unlike the English word “godliness” the Greek term here does not include anything about God. Another common translation is “piety.”

Godliness and piety sound pretty generic, but the equivalent Hebrew term has a very specific meaning. The Hebrew word is chasidut, or *chasidus* if you have an Ashkenazi accent. It’s the same word used to describe Hasidic Jews, the spiritual movement that began in 18th century Europe. But here in 2 Peter we are not talking about the religious movement, of course, but a character trait, one that Yeshua emphasizes repeatedly in the Gospels.

It is also a character trait heartily endorsed by the mussar masters, including the Ramchal in his important book *Mesillat Yesharim* or *Path of the Just*. Between these two sources: *Path of the Just* and the Gospels, we will have ample material to understand and apply the concept of chasidut to our lives.

Yeshua’s statement that one’s righteousness must exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees is an expression of chasidut.

First, you must understand that the scribes and Pharisees were “righteous.” They were tzaddikim. That means that they fulfilled the basic outward expressions of the Torah and halacha. They abstained from non-kosher food. They rested on Shabbat. They tithed their produce.

But they were not chasidim. They were not “pious.” This is what Yeshua was trying to say: being a tzaddik is not enough. To enter the kingdom, one must be a chasid.

Defining Chasidut

Mesillat Yesharim rightly notes that “piety” is often misunderstood. It’s not the same thing as religiosity. It doesn’t mean prudishness. When I think of a pious person, my first thought is someone who is extremely dedicated to their religious persona. But that’s not it. *Mesillat Yesharim* explains:

It is known which mitzvot are binding on every Jew and the extent their obligation reaches. But he who truly loves the Creator, blessed be He, will not strive and intend to discharge himself with the known obligations binding on every Jew.

So in other words, the Ramchal explains that we each have a set of obligations, dos and don’ts in Torah and halacha that we are required to meet. But if you truly love Hashem, these minimal obligations are not the target you’re aiming for. He continues:

Rather, what will happen to him is the same as that of a son who loves his father. Even if his father reveals a slight indication of something he desires, already the son will strive greatly, to the best of his ability, to fulfill this thing or service. Even though the father merely mentioned it once and only halfway, this will be enough for such a son to understand the direction of his father’s intent and to do for him even what he did not say explicitly. For he can deduce on his own that this thing will bring pleasure to his father, and he will not wait until his father commands him more explicitly or tells him another time.

The Ramchal is teaching us that when you love someone, you not only meet your obligations to them—obviously—but you extrapolate based on any clues you can find to try to anticipate what makes them happy.

The Ramchal’s point is to say that to be a chasid, a person characterized by chasidut, it means that one does not merely seek to fulfill their technical obligations to the Torah. They don’t check it off like a list. A chasid uses those obligations as a guide to understand God’s overall desire, then tries to fulfill those desires just to please him. He summarizes:

Hence, the general matter of Piety (chasidut) is to expand the fulfillment of all the mitzvot in all sides and conditions which are proper and possible.

So the idea of chasidut is not to be satisfied with your technical obligations to the mitzvot. One must seek to go beyond obligation. Yet expanding could get us into dangerous territory if we’re not careful. The Ramchal has a caveat here: what is “proper and possible.” Not every stringency is an improvement. How do we expand our observance in a healthy direction that pleases God?

If you are parents, you will understand this principle. If you are children, then as soon as you unlock this understanding you will graduate to a new level of maturity, and it will change your life forever.

A mother tells her son Bobby he has to wash the dishes before he can play video games. In typical teenager fashion, his body goes limp as he groans loudly. But he reluctantly complies, out of fear that he will lose his video game privileges.

This behavior really concerns his mother. Bobby only helps out when he is told to explicitly. He only does exactly what is asked of him, and no more. How will he ever become a conscientious adult? When will he go above and beyond what is asked of him?

Bobby overhears his parents talking about this but doesn't get all the details. Now he is concerned that his mother will take away his video game. So he decides to shape up.

The next time his mother instructs him to wash the dishes, he complies right away. He makes sure to wash every dish he is asked to wash, without missing a spot. That's good. But it does not make Bobby a chasid. You see, Bobby is not supposed to complain or drag his feet. He is not supposed to miss a spot. Everything he did was part of the assignment. Even though Bobby fulfilled his task perfectly, this does not make him a chasid; it makes him a tzaddik, and I'm sure his parents are happy about that progress. You see, when Bobby was little, some of the dishes would not come out so clean. His parents had to come in after he was done and redo a bit of his work. But they forgave him because he was little and still learning. But now that he's a teenager, washing the dishes perfectly does not make him special. It simply means that he is not being rebellious.

Finally, one day, Bobby has an epiphany. I don't know how it happened; maybe he finally ate enough nutrients for his brain to connect the right neurons. But suddenly, it happens. Bobby is flooded with a sense of gratitude. He is thankful for the home that he lives in, and for his parents who work so hard to make it a clean, safe, and fun place to live. He realizes that his parents have been instructing him to wash the dishes not to make his life miserable, but because that's a meaningful way he can help out. That day, he doesn't wait for his parents to tell him to wash the dishes. He not only washes the dishes, but he wipes down the counters and takes out the trash. He becomes a genuinely helpful person, observing what's happening around him and anticipating his parents' needs and desires. He is no longer acting out of fear of losing his video game privileges. He's doing this as an expression of love. Bobby has now become a chasid.

That's a bit of a fantasy, I'll admit. But it's not really about a teenager and his parents. It's about you and your Creator. When the transformation from tzaddik to chasid happens to you, the commandments no longer define the limits of your service of God. Instead, they are precious gifts that provide you with valuable insight into what God wants from you.

The Ramchal gives us one important insight about chasidut and how to figure out what type of expansion or extrapolation is proper and possible. It's hinted at in the word chasidut itself, which is related to the term chesed. Chesed is a word that means devotion, kindness, and love. Our extrapolation from our obligations should always be in the direction of chesed. Chesed toward God and chesed toward our fellow creatures. Or as our Master said, love God and love your neighbor. "On these two commandments depend all the Torah and the Prophets" (Matthew 22:40).

By pursuing the path of chesed, we can avoid the prohibition of "adding to the Torah" or the problem of blurring lines of distinction. Adding to the Torah is something like this: On the festival of Sukkot, the Torah commands Jewish people to wave four species of plants. Well God really seems to like plants, so I will wave five or six species. That's not extrapolating in the direction of chesed.

Another way to avoid the prohibition of "adding to the Torah" is to keep it to yourself. Judge yourself on the basis of chasidut. On those occasions when it is necessary to judge others, do so on the basis of tzedek, righteousness.

Examples from our Master

Remember, Yeshua said, “Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the Kingdom of heaven.” Then he goes on to provide specific examples of chasidut. Each are areas where a certain instruction must be understood not as an end in itself, but as a clue into God’s desire. However, the generation is failing at doing so. Let’s take a look at what those are.

Matthew 5:21-22: “You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.’ But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, ‘You fool!’ will be liable to the hell of fire.”

A person who simply refrains from murder is a tzaddik. He did the mitzvah. But Yeshua is telling us he is not a chasid unless he sees in this commandment Hashem’s desire for the peaceful resolution of disputes. Now, you can actually be taken to court for insulting or humiliating someone, but you can’t be prosecuted on earth for simply being angry at another person. But heaven is watching, and unless you act with chasidut and seek reconciliation, the Kingdom of heaven is going to be closed to you.

Yeshua tells us, “If you are offering your gift [that is, your sacrifice] at the altar [in the Temple] and there remember that your brother has something against you [meaning that your relationship is broken], leave your [sacrifice] there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your [sacrifice]” (Matthew 5:23-24).

Why is it more important to reconcile peacefully than to offer a sacrifice? Yeshua is warning the generation that if they do not achieve this level of chasidut, you not even be able to offer a sacrifice in the Temple, because it will be destroyed. Hatred destroys the Temple.

Let’s look at the next one. Yeshua tells us, “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery’” (Matthew 5:27). If a man doesn’t sleep with another man’s wife, if a married woman does not sleep with a man other than her husband, this person is a tzaddik or a tzadeket. They fulfilled their obligations. But if you are a chasid, this mitzvah becomes a precious clue about God’s desire for human sexuality. “But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart” (Matthew 5:28).

The yetzer hara loves looking for loopholes in this one. And it does a great job finding ways to exonerate our behavior and to declare us to be tzaddikim. But the reality is, if you are trying to find the loophole, either in the Torah’s commandment about adultery, or Yeshua’s lesson about adultery of the heart, then you are not exhibiting the middah of chasidut, and you are simply distancing yourself from the Kingdom of heaven. Tell your yetzer hara: it’s not enough to be a tzaddik.

We can do the same with the statement about divorce. Yeshua refers to the commandment in Deuteronomy 24:1 that if you send away your wife, you must issue her a *get*, a certificate of divorce, which she can provide in court to prove that she is no longer married and can now move on with her life and marry another man. In other words, you’re not just allowed to send her away and lock the door, leaving her abandoned with no source of income or protection, yet still locked into a marriage

covenant she cannot violate. Now if you make sure that when you kick her out, you give her that piece of parchment, you are a tzaddik. But why is this mitzvah here? It's not to approve of marriages falling apart. It's here to tell us a husband has a responsibility to care for the woman he marries. That we cannot take our marriage bond or other people's lives lightly.

Again, the commandment says, "Do not swear falsely." Our master teaches us that we must act with chasidut by steering clear of swearing vows and oaths.

Then Yeshua quotes an idea found in this week's parashah: "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth'" (Matthew 5:38). If you are a victim, this commandment tells you that you cannot demand compensation beyond the damage done to you. If someone dents your car and causes \$300 worth of damage, then you are entitled to \$300 in damages. You cannot sue them for \$3,000. If you lay claim to that \$300, you're a tzaddik. But Yeshua wants us to see the chesed embedded in this commandment. Maybe you don't always have to get what's coming to you. Maybe you can deal gracefully with loss, with a little humiliation.

Finally, Yeshua quotes Leviticus 19:18: "Love your neighbor." The technical border of this commandment implies that if one is not a neighbor, if one is not a friend, then you're off the hook. You found the loophole: go ahead and hate. But if you behave with chasidut, the mitzvah of love establishes a principle of what God values and desires.

People point to this chapter and claim that Yeshua is setting the bar higher than the Torah. In a way, that's not really true. Setting the bar higher would be adding to the Torah. It wouldn't be chasidut, it would be making it more difficult to be a tzaddik. Rather, Yeshua is encouraging us to achieve the ideal standard of behavior the Torah wanted from us all along.

Yet we have to accept that chasidut is different from the set-in-stone obligations in the Torah. It is dependent on each person's circumstances and individual potential.

For example, a D-minus is a passing grade in school. The school is required to apply an objective measurement, and a D-minus is technically all a student is obligated to achieve. But for most children, a D-minus does not reflect their potential. A parent who knows his child is capable of getting an A is not going to be pleased if the child gets a D-minus, a C, or even a B. On the other hand, there are children under circumstances where a D-minus is an incredible achievement and fulfillment of their potential. Hashem knows what you are capable of, and that's what he will hold you to. Nonetheless, let's be honest: it's probably far more than you think.

Acquiring Chasidut

Chasidut is an incredibly important middah, and Yeshua has made it clear that it is an essential step on the way to the Kingdom. How do we acquire this trait? Especially if you are already falling short of being a tzaddik. I can't even keep my basic obligations—how could I even imagine going "above and beyond"?

Ramchal teaches that chasidut can be acquired through contemplation. First you contemplate how perfect Hashem is, how exalted, how enormous is the gap between our lowliness and his greatness, and you become filled with fear and awe.

Then you contemplate his chesed toward us, his kindness, love, and devotion. How he gave the Torah and its commandments as an act of love. And this will awaken one to understand Hashem not just as Creator and King, but as Father. Recognizing him as Abba will inspire within you a longing to reciprocate back to him as his loving child. So contemplation is the way to achieve this, and the Ramchal particularly recommends using Tehillim, Psalms, to inspire you in the love of God. The apostolic community was very big on Psalms.

I love this advice but let me put it to you a little more simply. Change the reason why you keep the Torah. Right now, you keep the Torah because you have to. If you don't, it's a sin. This is serving God out of fear.

Now, without worrying too much about how observant you are, just change why you are doing it. Focus on serving God out of love; your goal is now not to get a passing grade, but to please Hashem as much as possible. The commandment now gives you valuable intelligence into how to achieve this.

Let's look at an example. Davening. Prayer. If you are an adult male Jew, the basic obligation is to daven three times a day, with a minyan if possible. Having kavanah while you do so is not extra credit—it's part of the basic obligation. If you are not an adult male Jew, you are still obligated to pray every day, maybe not the specific words of the Siddur, and perhaps not at any specific time. But if you ignore Hashem, it is a sin. I don't know about you, but I'll admit that sometimes I daven because I'm required to.

Let's change that. Contemplate. Hashem is so far beyond this universe, we cannot comprehend him. And then he reaches down to earth and says, I want to hear your voice. Every day. I want time with you. Read Tehillim. Psalm 84 says:

To the choirmaster: according to The Gittith. A Psalm of the Sons of Korah. How lovely is your dwelling place, O LORD of hosts! My soul longs, yes, faints for the courts of the LORD; my heart and flesh sing for joy to the living God. Even the sparrow finds a home, and the swallow a nest for herself, where she may lay her young, at your altars, O LORD of hosts, my King and my God. Blessed are those who dwell in your house, ever singing your praise! Selah (Psalm 84:1-4)

If that's why you daven, and not because you have to, it changes the whole experience. It's no longer about whether you count toward the minyan, or what's technically required of you. You're no longer counting how many pages are left or trying to justify which parts are strictly obligatory and which ones can be skipped. Instead, you're eager to join with your brothers and sisters whenever possible in order to enthrone and commune with your Father and King, the creator of the universe.

Be a Chasid

Sweeping changes are hard, but today I just want to challenge you to pay attention as you go about your service of God. With each thing you do, ask yourself whether you are serving God out of love or fear, and what it would look like if you performed that commandment with chasidut.

Remember that this is not optional. It's how we get to the kingdom. As you read the words of the Master, which you do frequently because you are his disciple, notice how often he employs the principle of chasidut, of going beyond your obligation and instead seeking to please Hashem in every way possible.

It's time to stop being like a lazy teenager afraid of losing his video game privileges. Be like Bobby and grow up. You will no longer feel like your religious persona is a hollowed-out shell. The cognitive dissonance of a two-faced life will fade away. Your life will be permeated by closeness to Hashem, and most importantly of all, you will be bringing this world closer to the Kingdom of our Master.

I ask Hashem to bless you all, and I ask you to bless me in the same way, that he would purify our hearts to serve him in truth and love, and that we would cling to the path Yeshua set before us to arrive at the Kingdom. Shabbat shalom.