

TIMELESS ∞ TORAH

Summer Reflections

PARSHAT RE'EH - VISION, SELF, AND THE PATH OF TOV AND YASHAR

Vision, Self, and the Path of Tov and Yashar

This week's parshah, Re'eh, begins with the powerful imperative, '*Re'eh Anochi Noten Lifneichem Hayom Brachah U'Klalah* - See, I set before you today a blessing and a curse (11:26)'. The very first word, '*Re'eh*' - 'See,' immediately draws our attention to the concept of vision. This is not just about physical sight; it is about seeing with depth, with insight, and a profound understanding of the choices and paths before us. This verse is an invitation to actively perceive the implications of our decisions, empowering us to discern the paths of blessing and curse.

Rabbi Yechezkel Weinfeld (Jerusalem, contemporary) highlights a fascinating connection here: the word '*Anochi*' - 'I' (as in 'I set before you'), hints at the concept of *Anochi*, the sense of self. Our individuality can be a *Brachah* (a blessing) or a *Klalah* (a curse). A self-centred 'I' can lead to detachment from *Avodat Hashem* (the service of God). Conversely, a healthy sense of self, understood as a unique vessel for Divine purpose, can propel us to extraordinary acts of kindness, learning, and service. True vision always incorporates a sense of self - *Re'eh* is intertwined with *Anochi*. Those who truly 'see with vision' utilize their self not for personal gain, but as a tool for growth and improvement, recognizing their unique role in Creation.

The Nuance of Tov and Yashar

What truly brings goodness and absolute blessing from Hashem, ensuring a positive legacy for the next generation, as the Torah states, '*L'maan yitav lecha u'levanecha acharecha* - so that it will be good for you and for

your children after you'? The answer lies in two pivotal words in the same verse: '*Ki taaseh hatov vehayashar b'eini Hashem Elokecha* - When you do what is good and upright in the eyes of Hashem, your God (12:28)'. This verse is a promise, a blueprint for a life imbued with Divine love.

What is the difference between *tov* (good) and *yashar* (upright)? This question has captivated the Jewish people for generations, revealing profound layers of meaning in our ethical and spiritual obligations.

Rashi, quoting Rabbi Akiva, explains that *tov* refers to absolutes - clear distinctions between good and bad, right and wrong. This primarily encompasses *mitzvot* (commandments) between us and Hashem. These Divine decrees transcend human understanding; their inherent goodness is rooted in their source. We accept them as inherently right because they are God's will.

Yashar, on the other hand, refers to *mitzvot* between us and other people - upright, honest, and ethical conduct. These often navigate more nuanced, 'grey' areas, where perceptions can be subjective. The yardstick here is *yashrut*, 'uprightness', demanding sensitivity, empathy, and integrity in our interactions. Thus, for Rabbi Akiva, *tov* is about our vertical relationship with God, and *yashar* is about our horizontal relationship with humanity. However, the same Midrash (Sifri, 52) strikingly presents an opposing view from Rabbi Yishmael. He states that *tov* refers to *mitzvot* between people, while *yashar* refers to *mitzvot* between us and Hashem.



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The Malbim (d.1879), in his commentary on the Chumash, offers a profound reconciliation of these seemingly opposite views. Rabbi Yishmael challenges us to elevate our understanding. Our task is to delve deeper, to comprehend why mitzvot like wearing tefillin are not just 'good' (as in commanded by God) but also '*yashar*' – inherently the right thing to do, aligning with a deeper sense of virtue. Similarly, Rabbi Akiva encourages us to understand that the kindness we extend to others is not just '*yashar*' (ethical), but ultimately '*tov*' – the absolute good, because Hashem has commanded it.

From both Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Yishmael, therefore, we learn that the Jewish approach is to constantly strive for balance in all our actions. It is to do the right thing, to fulfill Hashem's will (*tov*), but always with a sense of *yashar* - to understand why living life this way is the best possible path we can choose, the straight path, the path of *yashrut*. This integrated approach ensures our religious observance is deeply meaningful, and our ethical conduct Divinely inspired.

The Enduring Path

This balanced approach is powerfully illustrated by the incredibly moving words of Elie Wiesel, describing the observance of the mitzvah of tefillin in Auschwitz, a testament to the enduring power of *tov* and *yashar* even in the darkest of times. In a 1982 article he wrote:

'I don't know how, but someone had managed to smuggle in a pair of tefillin by bribing a kapo with dozens of bread and margarine rations.

I only know that every morning many of us rose before the call-up to perform this mitzvah.

Jewish law would not have required it under the circumstances. One is not obligated to sacrifice his life for the sake of donning tefillin. And yet, Jews who did not know each other, who perhaps did not even speak the same language, met each morning at dawn, exposed themselves to nameless dangers for the sake of not interrupting a millennia-old tradition. I do not understand it. I will never understand whence they derived so much courage and marshalled so much self-denial, even while the world was forsaking them and surrendered them to death'.

This commitment to both the absolute command (*tov*) and the inherent uprightness of doing the right thing (*yashar*), even in the most unimaginable circumstances, is the pathway we too have inherited. These practices connect us to something eternal, providing inner strength that transcends physical hardship. Our task is to always do what is good through diligently searching for and finding the straight, *yashar*, path in life, a path that integrates our spiritual duties (*tov*) with our ethical responsibilities.

Understood in this way, the vision of 'Re'eh' calls on us to 'see' not just our immediate choices, but the long-term impact of our actions, shaping our destiny and that of the entire Jewish people.