

Who is Righteous?

Introduction

This week’s Torah portion, *Shemot*, is the first one in the Book of Exodus. The portion abounds with righteous people working to serve God’s plan. The parasha opens with the *names* of the sons of Jacob, leaders of the twelve tribes of Israel:

וְאֵלֶּה שְׁמוֹת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל הַבָּאִים מִצְרָיִם אֶת יַעֲקֹב אִישׁ וּבֵיתוֹ בָּאוּ

These are the names of the sons of Israel who came to Egypt with Jacob, each coming with his household. [Ex. 1:1]

Later we are introduced to Moses [Ex. 2:10], his father Amram [Ex. 2:1] and his brother Aaron [Ex. 4:14], his father-in-law Jethro [Ex. 2:16]. God also tells Moses to “assemble the elders of Israel”. [Ex. 3:16]

All of them are righteous men. Only men? Oh, no. Plenty of righteous women also, working behind the scenes to foil the plans of evil men. There are the midwives Shifrah and Puah; Moses’ mother Yocheved; Moses’ sister Miriam; Pharaoh’s daughter Bitya; Jethro’s seven daughters; Moses’ wife Tzipporah; Aaron’s wife Elisheva; and even all Israelite women as a group. Both the Talmud and the Midrash say:

The Israelites were delivered from Egypt as a reward for the righteous women who lived in that generation. [Sotah 11b; Ex. R. 1:12]

Righteousness

We “feel”, from the context, that all these people are “righteous”, even though they have flaws that the Torah makes clear.

- They practice צדק *tzedek*, or justice.
- They engage in צדקה *tzedakah*, or charity.
- They are צדיקים *tzaddikim*, or righteous people.

The root צדק and its derivatives appear over 500 times in the Tanach. Same word root used in Hebrew for righteousness, justice and charity. Its opposite is רשעה, *rish’ah* – wickedness.

So who are these righteous people? Are they saintly individuals performing only good deeds all around them, with no thought of personal gain or fame or reward, for principle and love of God? No. One can have flaws and still be called “righteous”:

כִּי אֵלֶם אֵין צַדִּיק בְּאֶרֶץ אֲשֶׁר יַעֲשֶׂה טוֹב וְלֹא יִחַטָּא:

For there is not a single righteous man on earth who [always] does what is good and does not sin. [Eccl. 7:20]

Righteousness is acquired, not innate

It is an acquired trait that must be constantly improved:

And even if the entire world says to you: You are righteous, consider yourself wicked (רשע). [Niddah 30b]

The Rambam makes that point crystal-clear:

Do not allow your thoughts to dwell on what ridiculous fools of other peoples and a majority of asinine individuals among the children of Israel say, namely that the Holy One, blessed be He, decrees at the very embryonic state of every man whether he should be righteous or wicked.

The matter is not so. Every man is capable of being as righteous as Moses our Teacher or as wicked as Jeroboam, wise or unlearned, merciful or human, miser or philanthropist, and so in all other tendencies. There is none to either force things on him or to decree things against him; either to pull him one way or draw him another way, but he alone, of his own free will, with the consent of his mind, bends to any path he may desire to follow. [Mishneh Torah, Repentance 5:2]

In that vein, the Talmud says that intent does not matter: A good deed performed for a selfish motive does not detract from its merit:

It was taught in a baraita: One who gives to charity so that his son will live, or to be allowed into the World-to-Come, is [still] a full-fledged righteous person [as far as that mitzvah is concerned]. [Pesachim 8a-b]

The Musar movement was founded in Lithuania to teach ways to achieve righteousness.

Benefits of righteousness

Happiness:

אַשְׁרֵי שֹׁמְרֵי מִשְׁפָּט עֹשֵׂה צְדָקָה בְּכָל-עֵת:

Happy are those who keep justice and do righteousness at all times. [Ps. 106:3]

Spreading peace, calm and confidence:

וְהָיָה מַעֲשֵׂה הַצְדָּקָה שְׁלֹמֹם וְעִבְדֹת הַצְדָּקָה הַשָּׁקֵט וְהַיָּסוּד עַד-עוֹלָם:
And the work of righteousness shall be peace, and the effect of righteousness
shall be calm and confidence forever. [Isa. 32:17]

Bringing appreciation from others:

Talmud: Even after they die the righteous are considered alive, and
even while they are living the wicked are considered dead. [Ber. 18b]

Spreading justice (not enough to abstain from evil: must *do* good):

צֶדֶק צֶדֶק תִּרְדּוּף – *Tzedek, tzedek tirdof*
Justice, justice shall you pursue. [Deut. 16:20]

Bringing tangible reward:

The psalmist tells us (a verse we also recite in *Birkat Hamazon*, the
Grace after Meals):

נָעַר אָיֵיתִי גַם-תְּקַנֵּנִי וְלֹא-רָאִיתִי צָדִיק נִעְזֵב וְיֹרְעוּ מִבְּקֶשׁ-לֶחֶם
I have been young, and I am now old; and I have not seen the righteous
abandoned, nor his seed begging for bread. [Ps. 37:25]

Don't overdo it

Ecclesiastes warns:

אַל-תִּהְיֶה צָדִיק הַרְבֵּה וְאַל-תִּתְחַכֵּם יוֹתֵר לָמָּה תִּשְׁוֶה
Don't be too righteous and don't act too wise. Why should you destroy yourself?
[Eccl. 7:16]

Possible meanings: Don't be too merciful. (Talmud implies: Don't be more
merciful than God. [Yoma 22b]) Exercise "tough love". Don't expect too much.
Don't overestimate your abilities. Don't restrict yourself beyond the Torah.
Take risks to do good.

In commenting on this verse, Maimonides writes:

The Sages command: Do not deprive yourself of anything except what the Torah
has prohibited... They have even said: "Is it not enough for you what the Torah
has forbidden, that you forbid yourself even other things"? [Nedarim Y 7.37] And in
this rule are included those who are continuously fasting, for they are not in the
good way, and the sages prohibited punishing oneself with fast days.

Righteous means more good than bad

Maimonides adopts a very simple definition: A righteous person is one who
is more good than bad:

כָּל אֶחָד וְאֶחָד מִבְּנֵי הָאָדָם יֵשׁ לוֹ תְּכֵיפֹת וְעֲוֹנוֹת. מִי שֶׁתְּכֵיפֹתָיו תִּתְרוֹת עַל עֲוֹנוֹתָיו צַדִּיק. וּמִי שֶׁעֲוֹנוֹתָיו תִּתְרוֹת עַל תְּכֵיפֹתָיו רָשָׁע

Each and every one of the sons of man has virtues and vices. He whose virtues exceed his vices is a righteous man (צדיק) and he whose vices exceed his virtues is an evildoer (רשע). [Mishneh Torah, Sefer Madda, Laws of Repentance 3:1]

But what practical value does this definition have for determining whether a person is righteous or not? It conjures up images of a point system, in which every action is assigned a positive or negative value, and if the sum is positive you are righteous. Such a system does not exist in Judaism. We do not rank the commandments. The Mishna says:

Rabbi [Yehudah haNasi] said: Be as scrupulous in observing a [seemingly] minor commandment as a [seemingly] major commandment, because you do not know the value of each commandment. [Pirkei Avot 2:1]

So is the Rambam just trying to tell us, “Don't be too hard on yourself. The bar is not as high as you think.”?

Maimonides goes on to say that this applies also to entire nations and even to the whole world:

A nation whose vices exceed its virtues is destroyed [as were Sodom and Gomorrah]. So, too, is the whole world [as in the time of Noah]. But the weighing is not according to the number of virtues and vices, but according to their magnitude. There are virtues that overbalance many vices ... and there are vices that overbalance many virtues... Only the All-knowing God knows the actual values of virtues and vices. [Mishneh Torah, Sefer Madda, Laws of Repentance 3:2]

Similarly, the Baal Shem Tov, the founder of Hassidism, a righteous man if ever there was one, is quoted as saying:

When a person gets up in the morning and looks at himself in the mirror, he thinks, “I am basically a good person. I have my faults. I have my foibles. I am not perfect. But I am more good than bad.”

Both ends of Jewish exegesis seem to agree, the rationalist and the mystic: “Righteous” means “I am more good than bad.”

The Lamed Vav

One would think that, with this low bar, there would be plenty of righteous people. But in the Talmud we read:

לֹא פָחוֹת עֲלֵמָא מִתְּלַתִּין וּשְׁיֵיתָא צַדִּיקֵי דְּמִקְבְּלִי אִפִּי שְׂכִינָה בְּכָל דְּרָא

The world has no fewer than thirty-six righteous people in each generation who greet the *Shekhinah* -- the Divine Presence -- every day. [Sukkah 45b, Sanh. 97b]

The expression “to greet the Shekhinah” is associated with Temple service, which sustains the world, as the Mishna says:

על שלשה דברים העולם עומד, על התורה ועל העבודה ועל גמילות חסדים

The world stands on three things: Torah, Temple service, and acts of kindness. [Avot 1:2]

These 36 are called the ל"ו *lamed vav* (30 is lamed and 6 is vav), the צדיקים *zaddikim nistarim* or “hidden righteous”. They sustain the world. If their number dips below 36, the world ends.

It is a strong belief in Hasidism. Mystics believe that they are unknown to the world, and to one another, and even to themselves. They do their work quietly. They are humble: If you claim to be one, it is proof you are not. The Messiah will likely be one of them.

God preserves the world for their sake, even if the rest of humanity becomes depraved. (Note the parallel with stories of the Flood and of Sodom and Gomorrah.)

However, note that some say it is 30 or 45, not 36:

-Rabbi Yohanan said: There are forty-five righteous individuals in whose merit the world continues to exist [30 and 15 in Babylonia and Israel]. [Hullin 92a]

-Rabbi Yehuda says: There are the thirty righteous individuals among the nations of the world, in whose merit the nations of the world continue to exist. [Hullin 92a]

The 2nd-century mystic, Rabbi Shim'on bar Yoḥai, possible author of Zohar, adds a curious note:

The world possesses not less than thirty men as righteous as Abraham. If there are thirty, my son and I are two of them; if ten, my son and I are two of them; if five, my son and I are two of them; if two, they are my son and I; if there is but one, it is I. [Gen. R. 35:2]

It does not say anywhere they have to be Jews. The Midrash notes:

I bring as witness heaven or earth that it does not matter if one is a Jew or a gentile, a man or a woman, a male slave or a female slave, the *ruach hakodesh* (Holy Spirit) imbues itself upon all of them according to their actions. [Tanna d'Bei Eliyahu Rabbah 9:1]

There are always *some* righteous people. Midrash:

There is no time in which the Holy One, blessed be He, permits the world to be without righteous ones. In fact righteous men appear in every generation. [Midrash Tanchuma, Miketz 6:1]

Conclusion

Whether to call someone “righteous” or not is somewhat subjective. Suffice it to say that people are obligated to pursue the ethical commandments in the Torah to the fullest extent of their ability, and should not worry about what they are called by others.

Shabbat shalom.