



We find in Parashat Vayera a verse in which God extols the virtues of our patriarch Avraham, who, as God foresees, "will instruct his children and grandchildren after him to observe the way of the Lord..." (18:19). What precisely is "the way of the Lord" which Avraham is commended for conveying to his offspring?

Maimonides cites and interprets this verse towards the end of the second chapter of *Hilkhot Dei'ot*, in conjunction with the concept of the *midat benonit*, or "the doctrine of the mean." In this chapter Maimonides defines the obligation of *ve-halakhta bi-drakhav*, "following in His ways," as requiring one to conduct himself with moderation, finding the proper balance between extremes such as self-denial and overindulgence, stinginess and disregard for one's basic needs. The Torah encourages – or, more precisely, demands – that one avoid extreme behavior of any kind, and find the delicate balance between opposing poles of conduct. (Maimonides famously makes an exception for humility, which in his view must be practiced in the extreme.) According to Maimonides, the term *derekh Hashem*, "the way of the Lord," refers to this kind of conduct, and it is this virtue that Avraham sought to instill within his children and grandchildren.

It is likely that Maimonides inferred this interpretation of *derekh Hashem* from the continuation of the aforementioned verse in Parashat Vayera: "he will instruct his children and grandchildren after him to observe the way of the Lord, **to perform righteousness and justice.**" God Himself appears to define "the way of the Lord" in terms of performing *tzedaka u-mishpat* – righteousness and justice. These two concepts are often understood as polar opposites. *Tzedaka* generally denotes acts of undeserved kindness, favors that one performs for another even though the beneficiary owes him nothing, and without any expectation of any sort of repayment. *Mishpat*, by contrast, generally refers to the strict "letter of the law," adhering unyieldingly to principle without bending one way or the other. God Himself testifies to the fact that Avraham embodied and transmitted the ideal of balancing *tzedaka* and *mishpat*, tempering generosity with a loyalty to strict justice.

A simple comparison between two narratives in Parashat Vayera could perhaps help demonstrate this balance that Avraham maintained between "righteousness" and "justice." In the beginning of the *parasha*, the Torah tells the famous story of the three visitors whom Avraham generously welcomed into his tent and treated to a lavish meal. Although they are later determined to be angels, Avraham was unaware of their identity and assumed that they were simple nomads; what more, according to Rabbinic tradition, they were presumed to be idol-worshippers (see Rashi, 18:4). Nevertheless, Avraham graciously hosted the men and served them with zeal, love and generosity, exemplifying the virtue of *tzedaka* – charity and kindness. (In his *Guide for the Perplexed* 2:42, Maimonides famously asserts that this event did not actually occur, and rather was shown to Avraham in a prophetic vision. Nevertheless, as Maimonides' son, Rabbi Avraham,

writes in his *Ha-maspik Le-ovdei Hashem*, p. 39, the events Avraham beheld in this vision clearly reflect his normal mode of conduct upon observing weary travelers passing near his tent.)

Later in the *parasha*, however, we find Avraham demanding justice and respect for his basic rights. During his period of residence in the region of Gerar, Avraham sternly protested the theft of his wells at the hands of the servants of Avimelekh, king of Gerar, and he also demanded official recognition of his ownership over a newly-dug well (see 21:25-30). Here, Avraham is not prepared to forego on what is rightfully his and allow local thieves to abuse his generous nature. Rather than allow the Gerarites to keep the unlawfully-seized water, Avraham demands their restoration and seeks to prevent such conflicts from arising in the future. Avraham, the man of *tzedaka*, is also the man of *mishpat*; he succeeded in avoiding both extreme benevolence and extreme legal rigidity, knowing when to demand justice and when to act with selfless generosity.