

5781 – Deuteronomy 16:18-21:9 – Shoftim (Judges)

*Translating Thoughts into Action*¹

Read about the great minds of history—those individuals who conceived of and constructed philosophies, theorems, and academic systems that furthered the development of human intelligence and knowledge.

Despite their enormous intellectual contributions to mankind, more often than not, the private lives of many of these famous personalities did not reflect their lofty ideas. On a personal level, their moral behavior left much to be desired.

When you approach a city to wage war against it ... you must not destroy its trees. You may eat of them, but you must not cut them down. Only trees that you know do not yield food you shall cut down.—

DEUTERONOMY 20:19-20

In instructing us about how to wage a war, the Torah is also providing guidance in fighting against those forces that stunt our personal spiritual growth.

The greatest benefit of a tree is the fruit it produces. **Similarly, the greatest hallmark of man must be the fruit that his intellect produces**—the knowledge must be absorbed by our emotions to create proper feelings and then actions.

Our intellectual understanding cannot remain in the realm of the abstract, but must affect our actions. Only then can we consider ourselves fully developed and complete human beings.

"Trees that you know do not yield food shall be cut down." **Intellect that remains cold and aloof is like a tree that has not produced fruit—it hasn't served its function.**

This verse is a necessary reminder that the true test of an individual is not so much his intellectual qualities, but how he refines and elevates his emotional self and actions.

1. *Despite their enormous intellectual contributions to mankind, more often than not, the private lives of many of these famous personalities did not reflect their lofty ideas. On a personal level, their moral behavior left much to be desired.*

a. Matthew 7:1-5

¹"Do not judge, or you too will be judged. ²For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you. ³Why do you look at the speck of sawdust

in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? ⁴How can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? ⁵You hypocrite, **first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye.**

b. Matthew 23:1-3

¹Then Yeshua said to the crowds and to his disciples: ²"The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat. ³So **you must be careful to do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach ...** ⁵"Everything they do is done for people to see ...

1) (Yeshua) may have criticized the hypocritical practices of **some Pharisees**, but **he did not attack Pharisaism as a religious movement.**²

2) The Pharisees were acutely aware of the dangers of hypocrisy. **Their self-criticism was even more biting than that of (Yeshua).**³

3) They even caricatured themselves saying that there were seven classes of Pharisees (J. Ber. 14b, chap. 9, *halachah* 7; J. Sot. 20c, chap. 5, *halachah* 7):

The "**shoulder Pharisee**," who packs his good works on his shoulder (to be seen of men); the "**wait-a-bit Pharisee**," who (when someone has business with him) says, *Wait a little; I must do a good work*; the "**reckoning Pharisee**," who when he commits a fault and does a good work crosses off one with the other; the "**economizing Pharisee**," who asks, *What economy can I practice to spare a little to do a good work?* the "**show me my fault Pharisee**," who says, *Show me what sin I have committed, and I will do an equivalent good work (implying that he had no fault)*; the **Pharisee of fear**, like Job; **the Pharisee of love**, like Abraham. **The last is the only kind that is dear (to God).**

a) **Only one of the seven classes of Pharisees is righteous and acceptable to God: the Pharisee who serves God from love.**

c. Matthew 23:27-28

²⁷"Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! **You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of the bones of the dead and everything unclean.** ²⁸In the same way, on the outside you appear to

1 Chana Weisberg, *Shabbat deLights, Vayikra/Bamidbar/Devarim*, (chabad.org), pp. 263-264.

2 Brad Young, *Jesus the Jewish Theologian*, Hendrickson Publishers, 1995), pp. 143-154.

3 David Bivin, "Jesus and the Oral Torah: Blessing," Jerusalem Perspective Online.

people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness.

1) Berachot 28a

Rabban Gamaliel had issued a proclamation [saying]. **No disciple whose character does not correspond to his exterior**⁽³⁾ may enter the Beth ha-Midrash. On that day many stools⁽⁴⁾ were added ... Rabban Gamaliel became alarmed and said: Perhaps, God forbid, I withheld Torah from Israel!⁽⁵⁾ He was shown in his dream **white casks full of ashes**.⁽⁶⁾

(3) Lit., 'whose inside is not as his outside,' a common Talmudic expression.

(4) Or 'benches'.

(5) By keeping out so many disciples.

(6) **Signifying that those he kept out were in fact not genuine.**

d. Luke 12:1-3, 54-56

¹Meanwhile, when a crowd of many thousands had gathered, so that they were trampling on one another, Yeshua began to speak first to his disciples, saying: "Be on your guard against **the yeast of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy**.² There is nothing concealed that will not be disclosed, or hidden that will not be made known. ³What you have said in the dark will be heard in the daylight, and what you have whispered in the ear in the inner rooms will be proclaimed from the roofs.

Mark 8:15—**the yeast of the Pharisees and that of Herod.**

Matthew 16:6—**the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees.**

1) Esther Rabbah I:17

There are ten portions of physical strength in the world, nine among the Chaldeans and one in the rest of the world. There are ten portions of courage in the world, nine in Judaea and one in the rest of the world. There are ten portions of beauty in the world, nine in Jerusalem and one in the rest of the world. There are ten portions of wisdom in the world, nine in the Land of Israel and one in the rest of the world. There are ten portions of the Torah in the world, nine in the Land of Israel and one in the rest of the world. **There are ten portions of hypocrisy in the world, nine in Jerusalem and one in the rest of the world**, as it is written, For from the prophets of Jerusalem is hypocrisy [E.V. ungodliness] gone forth into all the earth—E.V. land (Jer. XXIII, 15).

e. Romans 7:12-20

¹²So then, **the law is holy, and the commandment is holy, righteous and good.**

¹³Did that which is good, then, become death to me? By no means! Nevertheless, in order that sin might be recognized as sin, it used what is good to bring about my death, so that through the

commandment sin might become utterly sinful. ¹⁴**We know that the law is spiritual; but I am unspiritual**, sold as a slave to sin. ¹⁵I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. ¹⁶And if I do what I do not want to do, **I agree that the law is good**. ¹⁷As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me. ¹⁸**For I know that good itself does not dwell in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out** (lit., *for I have known that there does not dwell in me, that is, in my flesh, good: for to will is present with me, and to work that which is right I do not find* ...) ¹⁹For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing. ²⁰Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it.

1) In Tanya,⁴ R. Schneur Zalman points out an interesting dichotomy in the human condition. On one hand, man is fallible by nature, prone to selfishness and self-justification. On the other hand, man is in control over his impulses. He is not an animal, and has free will to act as he wills at any given time. In other words, we might not be perfect, but we have the choice to do perfect. Or to put it in psychological terms, **not everything that is wrong with us on the inside do we necessarily have to bring into expression on the outside**.⁵

2. *The greatest benefit of a tree is the fruit it produces.*

a. Psalm 92:12-15

¹²The righteous will flourish like a palm tree, they will grow like a cedar of Lebanon; ¹³planted in the house of the LORD, they will flourish in the courts of our God. ¹⁴**They will still bear fruit in old age, they will stay fresh and green**, ¹⁵proclaiming, "The LORD is up-right; he is my Rock, and there is no wickedness in him."

b. Matthew 7:15-20

¹⁵"Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. ¹⁶**By their fruit you will recognize them**. Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? ¹⁷Likewise, **every good tree bears good fruit**, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. ¹⁸A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. ¹⁹Every tree that does not bear good

4 Tanya is the foundational work of the Chabad movement. It lays down the practical and mystical fundamentals of the Chabad philosophy. It was authored by Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi (1745-1812), the founder of the Chabad-Lubavitch movement.

5 Rabbi Shais Taub, "My Name is ... and I am a Human Being—The Jewish idea of perfection." www.chabad.org/library/tanya/tanya_cdo/aid/1271917/jewish/My-Name-is-and-I-am-a-Human-Being.htm

fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. ²⁰Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them.

c. John 15:1-17

¹I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. ²He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while **every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful**. ³You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. ⁴Remain in me, as I also remain in you. **No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me**. ⁵**I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit**; apart from me you can do nothing. ⁶If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned ... ⁸This is to my Father's glory, **that you bear much fruit**, showing yourselves to be my disciples. ⁹As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you ...

¹²My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you ... ¹⁵I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you. ¹⁶You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you **so that you might go and bear fruit—fruit that will last**—and so that whatever you ask in my name the Father will give you. ¹⁷This is my command: Love each other.

d. Romans 7:4-6

⁴So, my brothers and sisters, you also died to the law through the body of Messiah, that you might belong to another, to him who was raised from the dead, **in order that we might bear fruit for God**. ⁵For when we were in the realm of the flesh, the sinful passions aroused by the law were at work in us, so that we bore fruit for death ...

3. *Our intellectual understanding cannot remain in the realm of the abstract, but must affect our actions.*

a. Isaiah 58:10

¹⁰and if you **spend yourselves** in behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed, then **your light will rise in the darkness, and your night will become like the noonday**.

b. Proverbs 19:16-17

¹⁶Whoever keeps commandments keeps their life, but whoever shows contempt for their ways will die. ¹⁷Whoever is kind to the poor lends to the LORD, and **he will reward them for what they have done**.

1) Deuteronomy 24:19

¹⁹When you are harvesting in your field and you overlook a sheaf, **do not go back to get it**. Leave it for the foreigner, the fatherless and the widow, so that the LORD your **God may bless you in all the work of your hands**.

c. Matthew 10:42

⁴²And if anyone **gives** even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones who is my disciple, truly I tell you, that person will certainly not lose their reward."

d. John 14:15-21

¹⁵**If you love me, keep my commands ...** ²¹**Whoever has my commands and keeps them is the one who loves me**. The one who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love them and show myself to them."

1) John 15:10-11

¹⁰**If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love**, just as I have kept my Father's commands and remain in his love. ¹¹I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and **that your joy may be complete**.

e. James 2:18-26

¹⁸But someone will say, "You have faith; I have deeds." **Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by my deeds**. ¹⁹You believe that there is one God. Good! **Even the demons believe that—and shudder**. ²⁰You foolish person, do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless? ²¹Was not our father Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? ²²You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did. ²³And the scripture was fulfilled that says, "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness," and he was called God's friend. ²⁴You see that **a person is considered righteous by what they do and not by faith alone**. ²⁵In the same way, was not even Rahab the prostitute considered righteous for what she did when she gave lodging to the spies and sent them off in a different direction? ²⁶**As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead**.

1) Romans 3:20

²⁰Therefore **no one will be declared righteous in God's sight by the works of the law**; rather, through the law we become conscious of our sin.

2) **20a For in his sight no one alive will be considered righteous,** quoted from Psalm 143:2.⁶

Greek *dikaioō*, corresponding to Hebrew *hatzdik*, **is to be understood in a legal sense as "declare righteous or innocent,"** rather than **"cause to behave righteously."** God does the latter too, as part of his work in believers after they trust in Yeshua the Messiah; and it is a lifelong process. But being declared innocent by God and considered righteous, no longer regarded by him as a sinner deserving of his adverse judgment (v. 19), happens instantaneously at the moment a person gives up his self-righteousness, accepts God's assessment of him and means of forgiveness (through Yeshua), and depends entirely on God's mercy.

As with other rabbinic citations from the *Tanakh*, the phrase quoted is meant to call to mind the entire context, Psalm 143:1-2 (see vv. 3-4N). This is the passage on which vv. 20-26 constitute at once *midrash* (vv. 19-26N), commentary and fulfillment:

"Apsalm of David:

"Hear my prayer, Adonai, give ear to my supplications;
in your faithfulness answer me with your righteousness;

"and do not enter into judgment with your servant;
for in your sight no one alive will be considered righteous."

The Psalmist is aware that no one's works suffice to earn him being declared righteous by God (v. 20a; see first paragraph of this note), and therefore he pleads to be answered with God's righteousness (vv. 21-26). And he expects a positive answer because God is faithful (vv. 22&N, 25-26). Verses 24-26 provide assurance that God will not enter into judgment with his trusting servants. In the rest of Psalm 143 the Psalmist acknowledges his dreadful condition and continues to plead for God's mercy. This must be the attitude of all who truly turn to God.

20b Legalistic observance of Torah commands. I use this phrase to render Greek *erga nomou* because the briefer and literal "works of law" **has almost always been misunderstood and made the underpinning of some dreadful theology.** "*Nomos*" ("law") is correctly taken by most interpreters to mean the Jewish Law, the Law of Moses, the Torah. **But from this point on, interpreters have usually riveted themselves to one of the following three misinterpretations of this verse:**

(1) "No one will be considered righteous by God on the ground of doing the good works the Torah requires." This is manifestly wrong because **the most important good work the Torah requires is trusting God, loving him with all one's heart and soul and strength** (Mk 12:28-30). Who can read the Torah without seeing that? Therefore, on the face of it, this interpretation is absurd. After all, **the Torah was given by God to be obeyed**; so why should obeying it not lead to being considered righteous by God? Moreover, Sha'ul quotes with approval Moses' pronouncement that "the person who does these things," who performs the righteous deeds commanded by the Torah, "will attain life through them" (10:5, quoting Lev 18:5). Surely attaining life and being considered righteous by God are equivalent.

(2) "No one will be considered righteous by God on the ground of doing the good works the Torah requires, because no one is able to live up to the Torah's demands (Yeshua excepted)." Those who hold to the interpretation of Paragraph (1) in spite of the difficulty raised there **defend their position by implicitly adding the clause about human inability. But such a teaching is not found in Sha'ul's argument here, or elsewhere in Romans, or, for that matter, anywhere in the Bible.**

On what biblical evidence might one base the conclusion that no one is capable of obeying the *Torah*? Ya'akov 2:10 says that "a person who keeps the whole Torah, yet stumbles at one point, has become guilty of breaking them all." But the "stumbling" spoken of here is rebellion against keeping a particular command of the *Torah* while claiming to uphold it. Ya'akov is not saying that anyone necessarily rebels (see Ya 2:10-11&N). Acts 15:10 speaks of Kefa's objecting to placing on the Gentiles "a yoke which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear." But this "yoke" meant "detailed mechanical rule-keeping, regardless of heart attitude, that some ... held to be the essence of Judaism. This was not the yoke of the *mitzvot* prescribed by God, but a yoke of legalism prescribed by men" (I am quoting Ac 15:10N). Yeshua himself objected to this (Mt 23:2-4, Mk 7:5-13&N).

The *Torah* was given to be obeyed, and God expected people to obey it. That is why Moses said,

This commandment which I command you today is not too difficult for you. nor is it beyond your grasp ... The word is very near you, in your mouth and in your heart, to do it." (Deuteronomy 30:11-14).

⁶ David H. Stern, *Jewish New Testament Commentary*, (Jewish New Testament Publications), pp. 343-346.

Sha'ul himself quotes from this passage at 10:6-8&N. **It is unthinkable that God instructed the Jewish people to observe a Law that was impossible to keep, for which the penalty of violation was death. The God of love does not play cruel games.** True, the people fell short of keeping the Torah; they sinned. But the Torah itself includes a procedure for dealing with sins, provided they were not committed "with a high hand," that is, in rebellion, after the manner of Ya 2:10&N. This procedure was the sacrificial system, and in fact the greater part of the Five Books of Moses is devoted to it. This system offered forgiveness to a repentant person who brought the required sacrifice ... Thus, at the time the Messiah died, the Torah provided a framework within which a person might be saved (Mt 19:16-22, Lk 1:6&N, MJ 11:1-40), provided he trusted God in everything and in no way relied on his own self-righteousness.

In conclusion, this understanding is wrong because there is no reason for supposing a person cannot live up to what the Torah demands. The Torah does not set an impossible standard. Rather, it sets a standard of faith, trusting in God, and of following its system of repentance and sacrifice for obtaining forgiveness from God and restoring a condition of being considered righteous in his sight.

- (3) "*No one will be considered righteous by God on the ground of the bad works the Torah requires.*" Even more ridiculous than the first mistaken interpretation, what this means is that **the Torah itself supposedly requires prideful, self-justifying, legalistic rule-following.** But the *Torah* itself inveighs vigorously against such behavior, and the New Testament quotes portions of the *Tanakh* which make that very point! Furthermore, Sha'ul calls the *Torah* "holy, just and good" (7:12), which could not be true of a *Torah* that demanded bad works or self-righteousness.

So then, why even mention such a peculiar understanding? Because many Christians seem to have the idea that the Torah was an inferior product of God, that the Messiah is in some sense "better" than the Torah, and that therefore **the Torah is relatively bad.**" But **such an interpretation impugns the character of God. It is tantamount to the second-century heresy of Marcion,⁷ who regarded the Old Testament as in-**

ferior to the New Testament and the God of the Old Testament as inferior to the God of the New.

Theology based on one or the other of these misinterpretations has taught Christians that the Jewish Law is inferior, inadequate, legalistic, a producer of pride, something separate from God's grace, superseded now that Yeshua has come, and of value only insofar as it points to the Messiah. If this were true, **anyone who would uphold such a Law must obviously be blind, foolish or misled.** Since Jews uphold the Mosaic Law, **it follows from these premises that Jews are blind, foolish or misled. In this way antisemitism is made virtually a pillar of Christian faith!** No wonder a "gospel" with such implications is unacceptable to Jews!

But there is an alternative. While sometimes Sha'ul uses the word "*erga*" ("works," in the plural) neutrally, nineteen times he employs it as a technical term with negative valence, signifying:

"actions stemming from a boastful, self-righteous belief that by doing them, by following a set of rules in one's own strength, without any trust in God or faithfulness towards Him, one can earn God's praise and applause and obligate Him to grant one a berth in heaven."

The word "*erga*" is used by itself in this sense at 4:2, 6:9:11; 11:6 (three times); Ep 2:9; 2Ti 1:9; and Ti 3:5. It is used with "*nomou*" ("of law") in the present verse, 3:27-28; 9:32; Ga 2:16 (three times); and Ga 3:2, 5, 10.

This is also the sense understood for "*erga*" ("works") in the third misinterpretation above. The difference between it and my understanding is that I do not take "*erga*" with the modifier "*nomou*" ("of law") to mean **"bad self-strength works prescribed in the Torah,"** but rather:

was the true Supreme Being, different from and opposed to the malevolent demiurge or creator god, identified with the Hebrew God of the (Herew Bible). He considered himself a follower of Paul the Apostle, whom he believed to have been the only true apostle ... a doctrine called Marcionism. Marcion published the earliest extant fixed collection of (Apostolic) books, making him a vital figure in the development of Christian history. Marcion (140 CE) was the first to arrange the Pauline letters systematically. His order was as follows: Gal, 1Cor, 2Cor, Rom, 1Thess, 2Thess, Laod (Eph?), Col, Phil, and Phl. Marcion represents a second stage in the evolution of the canon. **He flatly rejected the (Hebrew Bible) with its immature ideas of God and nationalistic messianism, and, since Paul had been, in his mind at least, anti-Jewish, he regarded his ten letters, the "apostolicon," as the new Scripture.** He added to these the Book of Luke, with editorial changes of his own, but ignored the other (Apostolic) writings.

⁷ Marcion of Sinope (c. 85–c. 160) was an early Christian theologian, an evangelist, and an important figure in early Christianity. Marcion preached that the benevolent God of the Gospel who sent (Yeshua the Messiah) into the world as the savior

"bad self-strength works produced when sinful people misuse and pervert the *Torah* that instead of regarding it as God's gracious gift intended both to orient people toward righteous, God-motivated behavior and at the same time to show them how far short they fall of achieving it, they regard the *Torah* as a rulebook containing requirements they can meet mechanically, without trusting God or even caring about him, and can therefore take great pride in their own achievements and have great self-satisfaction over how much they have pleased God."

In other words, "works of law" are indeed "works produced by the *Torah*," **but through its being used improperly**. This is what I have tried to convey in my rendering. "legalistic observance of Torah commands."

This is a good place to call attention to a book clarifying these issues: Daniel P. Fuller's *Gospel And Law: Contrast Or Continuum?* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1980).

20c What the Torah really does is show people how sinful they are, literally, "for through law is full-knowledge of sin." Greek *amartia* corresponds to Hebrew *chet*; both are usually translated "sin," but both also convey the sense, **missing the mark**," like an archer who shoots off-target. Thus, what the Torah gives to anyone who lets himself be affected by it is ever fuller awareness of how much he is missing the target of righteousness which the Torah sets before him. **This is, of course, not the Torah's only task—it also offers positive guidance toward right behavior**. In theory a Jew, with the Torah to direct him, might possibly be able to aim nearer the target than a Gentile without it. Nevertheless, his achievement will always fall short of the goal; and unless he realizes this and becomes appropriately humble he will surely not be saved. The subject is analyzed at length in Chapter 7.