



Mindfulness and Mussar Podcast transcript

Noah and the middah of tzedek (justice): An interview with Rabbi Andru Kahn of Temple Emanu-El in New York City – Episode #3

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Andrew Feldman: Welcome to the Mindfulness and Musar podcast. I'm Andy Feldman. We're continuing our yearlong focus on the chapters of the book, the Musar Torah Commentary. This week's chapter is called "Tzedek – Justice: Noah as Tzaddik." I'm very glad to have the author with us today. Rabbi Andrew Kahn, an associate Rabbi at Temple Emmanuel in New York City. He has a passion for cultivating and sharing Jewish spiritual practice, exploring new models of community, and crafting innovative ways to help others incorporate Judaism more deeply into their lives. Rabbi Kahn, welcome. Thanks for being with us and it's good to have a fellow Andy on the podcast.

Rabbi Andru Kahn: Wonderful to be here. Andy, thank you so much for all the work you're doing on this podcast.

Andrew Feldman: I want to start by asking you about the term *tzedek*. It's often described in one word, just like it is in the title of your chapter, as justice. But it is a multifaceted term – more complicated in some ways than many of the other *middot* or virtues. Tell us how you think of the meaning of *tzedek*.

Rabbi Andru Kahn: So, I think it often gets translated as justice or righteousness. I don't think either fully captures it. I think that *tzedek* is really the quality of being able to both discern one's place in the world and then to act skillfully and compassionately regardless of the popularity of your discernment. From your place in the world, it's about having a confident sense of directed moral mission.

Andrew Feldman: That's helpful. The parshah that your chapter focuses on is the story of Noah and the flood: *Parshat Noach*. And while the story in the Torah is pretty compact, there are other sources that help us add detail – interpretations, including a midrash that you cite. Tell us from those various sources, what can we learn about *tzedek* from Noah and the building of the arc.

Rabbi Andru Kahn: So, in the Torah itself, it says that Noah *is tzadik b'dorotav*, which means that he was the most righteous in his generation. His generation led God to want to destroy the world, so it doesn't say that much about him. But the midrash delves more deeply into this question and talks about how once he's given his mission to build an arc for himself, for his family, and for the animals that he's going to save. And all of those folks around him who were clearly lacking in *tzedek* were asking him questions. They were ridiculing him. In fact, they were even kind of threatening him and his family, and he kept doing it, knowing what he was doing

was right in its own way. He didn't try to necessarily convince them that they should be doing it, but he did act as an exemplar knowing what his role was based on his special knowledge in this instance, given to him directly by God.

But we all get special knowledge of ourselves. We all can reflect and take the time to reflect deeply on what our role is in the world and how our individual proclivities and abilities can affect those around us and how we can act as an exemplar in those ways. And Noah, according to the midrash, did exactly that, which helps us to understand a little bit more about what a good version of *tzedek* in the world might look like.

Andrew Feldman: You've got a quote in your chapter, which builds on what you just said. You wrote, "Unbending confidence like Noah's can be quite dangerous. When taken in the wrong direction, a key element of *tzedek* is discernment based on a foundational sense of justice, as well as a willingness to compromise." It underscored for me how *tzedek* is knowing when not to back down, when to be strong; on the other hand, also knowing when compromise is so important.

Rabbi Andru Kahn: Yes, absolutely. And that piece I really rooted in the segment from the Talmud that I start my essay with about how to discern *tzedek* when two people are in conflict. It is an ongoing process in this *sugya*, looking at how two different moving bodies deal with conflict, not just by trying to get our way, but by understanding how our behavior affects those we are in conflict with, and figuring out how best to continue on in our directions in a way that allows us both to prosper. Because each of us are, are created in the image of God, right? Each of us have our own valuable way to be in the world, even when those come into conflict, they have to be respected.

Andrew Feldman: On that important note, we'll take a short break for reflection and be back with more with Rabbi Kahn.

[Music clip]

Andrew Feldman: Before the break, we were saying how *tzedek* challenges us to be thoughtful about the balance between standing up for what you believe, but also upholding the values of empathy and compassion for others.

Rabbi Andru Kahn: Absolutely – and not just challenging us, but in many ways the very clear command in Deuteronomy "*tzedek, tzedek tirdof*" (justice, justice, you shall pursue) shows that that balance that you're describing is central for what it means to be a Jewish person is attempting to find the *tzedek* in any particular conflict we're in, or any moment we're in, is a core aspect of what it means to be Jewish. And not allowing the pull of *gevurah*, of harsh justice, to pull us too far in its direction. And also not allowing compassion to pull us too far in its direction, because then we lose our own sense of self and lose our own kind of sense of personal mission. We have to find that balance.

Andrew Feldman: You've got questions for self-reflection at the end of your chapter, a few of which I wanted to share with your audience. One set of questions is: "When have you backed down from something you had determined to be right? What led you to back down? How can you prepare yourself to be more steadfast in the future?" The other set is: "When have you pushed too hard without compromise? How can you prepare yourself to be open to compromise without fully giving up on your belief?" I thought those questions were so useful in helping us all think about. In terms of personal growth, where are we most challenged in terms of getting that balance of set, right?

Rabbi Andru Kahn: Yes, and I think that it's really about relationship. The idea is *tzedek* helps us to embody right relationship with those around us, and the world around us at large, and to maintain that balance by being aware of when your internal push to cause something to go the way you think is correct is pushing too hard and perhaps going to break that right balance. Or when the external push against you is pushing too hard and threatening to maybe break your own sense of what is right. It's being able to find that middle point and maintain that balance for yourself in any given moment – which is quite difficult.

Andrew Feldman: Absolutely. Rabbi Andrew Kahn of Temple Emmanuel in New York City, Andy, thank you for being our third interviewee on the podcast and most importantly for sharing really thoughtful and useful insights. We appreciate it.

Rabbi Andru Kahn: It's been a pleasure. Thanks so much, Andy.

Andrew Feldman: For our listeners, the book on which our interviews are based is *The Mussar Torah Commentary, A Spiritual Path to Living, a Meaningful and Ethical Life*. It's edited by Rabbi Barry Block and published by the Central Conference of American Rabbis. To learn more about the book, head to mussar.ccarpress.org. The music on our podcast is by David Chevin and Warren Bird from their album *Let Us Break Bread Together*. Thanks for being with us.