

JEWISH STUDY NETWORK

Behar/Bechukosai

Parshat Bechukotai contains a long list of blessings G-d promises to those who keep the mitzvot and curses to those who do not. A similar list, also known as the tochacha (rebuke), appears in the end of the Torah in Parshat Ki Tavo. Let us use take this opportunity to learn more about the meaning of Divine reward and punishment and how it relates to our lives.

Maimonides (Laws of Repentance, 9:1) struggles with the rewards and punishments presented in the Torah, which all deal with a person's well-being or suffering in this world. For example, G-d says keeping the Torah or not keeping it will result in peace or war, children or miscarriages, sustenance or hunger. If so, why does the Talmud say (Kiddushin 39b) that G-d rewards and punishes in the World to Come or in Hell, implying the blessing and curses of this world are not the real rewards and punishments?

Maimonides answers that if a person fulfills the mitzvot and studies Torah, then G-d will give him the resources and peaceful conditions to enable him to continue his spiritual growth and thus earn reward in the World to Come. If one violates the mitzvot, G-d might make his life difficult in this world and make it harder for him to do mitzvot, which will then trigger greater punishments in the next world. Maimonides says that when one observes the mitzvot he will reap rewards in both worlds, and conversely suffer in both worlds because of sinful activity.

Although Maimonides paints a clear picture of G-d rewarding and punishing in both worlds, we often struggle with this because we see righteous people suffering in this world. While we believe they will receive great reward in the World to Come, we would like to see them enjoying the material blessings in this world which the Torah describes. How do we deal with this troubling reality?

R' Moshe Chaim Luzzatto (18th century) explains that within the system of Divine justice, sometimes we do not understand how suffering could really be best for us. Our suffering atones for our sins, cleansing us from the spiritual stain they put on us and sparing us from worse suffering in the next world. He explains this applies both to the suffering of an individual and to the pain of the entire Jewish nation throughout history. The suffering of the Jewish people atones for their sins, providing the purification they need.

R' Luzzatto adds that when we experience the final redemption, we will finally understand how all of the hardships were really beneficial for us. Therefore, King David says (Psalms 126) when messiah comes, "Then our mouths will be filled with laughter, and our tongue with glad song." Laughter, the result of an unexpected reversal, will punctuate the joy of the redemption. It will become funny and ironic how we once looked at the harsh events of history as so painful and constricting, when in reality they served as the necessary birth pangs before the final redemption.



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Although we do not fully understand why G-d rewards and punishes us in a practical way, it remains a core belief of Judaism that G-d holds us accountable for our actions, even though we do not understand his system of accounting. Nachmanides (Exodus 13) explains that the various miracles involved in the Jews' exodus from Egypt were meant to teach Pharaoh that G-d intervenes with the world, rewarding and punishing people based on their actions. We mention these miracles every day in the blessing we say after Shema, using this historical event as a tool to strengthen our own faith in G-d and the belief that he holds us accountable for our deeds. Maimonides counts belief in reward and punishment as one of his thirteen principles of faith, and the second paragraph of the Shema focuses on the rewards and punishments that result from our performance or violation of mitzvot.

Understanding the centrality of belief in reward and punishment will help us relate to a passage from the Talmud in a deeper way. The Talmud (Megilla 31b) says Ezra organized the weekly Torah readings so that we would read the blessings and curses of Leviticus prior to the holiday of Shavuot. The Talmud explains that he wanted "to end the year and its curses," and since fruit trees are judged on Shavuot, the time before Shavuot is considered the end of the year. Logically, simply reading the Torah passage about curses should not prevent G-d from administering punishment. So why did Ezra insist on the communal readings of the blessings and curses before Shavuot?

If we look at reward and punishment as a way of simply earning rewards or being hit for breaking laws, then it would not seem to have any direct connection to Shavuot more than to Passover or Sukkot. But if we understand that our covenantal relationship with G-d demands certain standards of conduct, then the blessings and curses which result from that special relationship directly relate to Shavuot.

When we received the Torah on Shavuot, we received the terms of our contract with G-d, sealing the covenant which G-d wanted to make with us when he redeemed us from Egypt on Passover. We read the blessings and curses before Shavuot to prepare ourselves for what the acceptance of the Torah includes. We recognizing we entered a special agreement on Shavuot which made us accountable for our actions. If we are extra sensitive to the weight of our actions and improve our ways accordingly, then we can hope to bring an end to the curses of the previous year and begin a new year of blessings starting on Shavuot.

Shabbat Shalom.

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