

## *Parashat Bechukotai*

### In Which World Do We Receive Our Ultimate Reward?

#### Living Mindfully in the Present or for the Sake of Future Reward?

The other day, I was learning *Rambam's 13 Principles of Belief* with my students as part of my weekly 'Basic Jewish Concepts' class. When discussing principle 11, "The belief in Divine Reward and Retribution," students felt assured to know that every one of our good deeds is recorded and that ultimately, we will reap its reward. Conversely, the fact that "there is a judge and there is judgment," and that even when nobody sees, we will eventually be held accountable for not acting in accordance with Hashem's mitzvot, fills us with awe. Yet, it is not always easy to truly believe in the principle of 'reward and punishment.' One of my students asked, "Why do some girls find their soulmate immediately without a word of prayer, whereas, the kindest women must cry their eyes out, and year after year dance at their friends' weddings, celebrate the birth of their friends' children while they remain single and forsaken?" A lively discussion began. One way to explain why the righteous suffer is that immediate reward and punishment in this world would jeopardize 'Free Choice' – the very condition of human existence. If, for example, every time a person performs the mitzvah of welcoming guests, he would win the lottery, and each time he spoke a word of lashon hara, his nose would grow long, then the importance of keeping all the mitzvot in the Torah would be obvious to everyone. "Therefore," I explained, sharing the traditional explanation with my students, "Hashem grants the wicked the reward for their few good deeds in this world, but they will suffer in the hereafter, whereas, the righteous receive their retribution in this world for their few sins, and will experience the highest spiritual pleasure in the eternal World-to-Come." Likewise, our sages teach, "This world is like a corridor to the World-to-Come. Prepare yourself in the antechamber, so that you may enter the banquet hall...." (*Pirkei Avot* 4:16). This view, echoed by the Ramchal, has become one of the most central of Jewish beliefs: The purpose of our Torah and mitzvot in This World is only a means towards the ultimate goal in the World-to-Come (*The Path of the Just* chapter 1). Yet, when I returned from teaching, I pondered further on this concept, asking myself: "Don't we want to live here and now in this world with our full consciousness and mindfulness in the present moment, rather than to be halfhearted in our current action, while striving towards some future goal in the unknown eternal world? Moreover, doesn't all this focus on eternal reward in the next world make our doing the mitzvot only in order to gain brownie points? Don't our sages teach, "Do not serve the Master for the sake receiving a reward; rather serve Him with no reward in mind" (*Pirkei Avot* 1:3)?

#### The Torah Focus on Living Fully in This World

Interestingly, this week's parasha seems to be in line with the notion of living fully in This World. When discussing the reward and punishment for those who observe or disobey the mitzvot, both *Parashat B'Chukotai* and *Parashat Ki Tavo* describe the blessings and curses. Yet in neither of them do we find the faintest reference to a reward in the World-to-Come. In fact, there is no explicit mention of *Olam Haba* in the entire Bible! Why does the Torah completely ignore the concept of the-World-to-Come when mentioning the blessings for keeping Hashem's mitzvot and curses for transgressing them? From the words of our parasha, it seems that the goal of the mitzvot is primarily to receive our physical reward in This World:

ספר ויקרא פרק כו (ג) אם בְּחֻקֵי תִלְכוּ וְאֶת מִצְוֹתַי תִּשְׁמְרוּ וְעִשִּׂיתֶם אֹתָם: (ד) וְנָתַתִּי גֶשְׁמִיכֶם בְּעֵתָם וְנָתַנָּה הָאָרֶץ יְבוּלָה וְעֵץ הַשָּׂדֶה יִתֵּן פְּרִיֹ: ספר ויקרא פרק כו (יד) וְאִם לֹא תִשְׁמְעוּ לִי וְלֹא תַעֲשׂוּ אֶת כָּל הַמִּצְוֹת הָאֵלֶּה: (טו) וְאִם בְּחֻקֵי תִמְאָסוּ וְאִם אֶת מִשְׁפָּטַי תִּגְעַל נַפְשְׁכֶם לְבַלְתִּי עֲשׂוֹת אֶת כָּל מִצְוֹתַי לְהַפְרֹכֶם אֶת בְּרִיתִי: (טז) אִף אֲנִי אֶעֱשֶׂה זֹאת לָכֶם וְהִפְקַדְתִּי עֲלֵיכֶם בְּהִלָּה אֶת הַשְּׁחָפֹת וְאֶת הַקְּדָחַת מְכֻלֹת עֵינַיִם וּמְדִיבַת נַפֶּשׁ וְזָרְעֵתֶם לְרֵיק זָרְעֵכֶם וְאָכְלוּ אֲבִיבֵיכֶם:

“If you follow My laws and faithfully observe My commandments, I will grant your rain in their season, so that the earth shall yield its produce and the trees of the field their fruit (*Vayikra* 26:3-4). “But if you do not obey Me and do not observe all these commandments. If you reject My laws and spurn My rules, so that you do not observe all My commandments and you break My covenant. I in turn will do this to you: I will wreak misery upon you – consumption and fever, which cause the eyes to pine and the body to languish. You shall sow your seed to no purpose, for your enemies shall eat it” (*Vayikra* 26:14-16).

### Physical Blessings – A Means for Achieving Ultimate Spiritual Reward

Rambam explains that all the physical rewards described in the Torah are only to give us the means to continue performing the mitzvot, in order to gain our reward in the Coming World. He explains, “...If we fulfill [the Torah] with joy and good spirit and meditate on its wisdom at all times, [G-d] will remove all the obstacles which prevent us from fulfilling it, for example, sickness, war, famine, and the like. Similarly, He will grant us all the good, which will reinforce our performance of the Torah, such as plenty, peace and money, so that we don’t need to be too involved in physical matters. Rather, we will be free to sit unburdened and study wisdom and perform mitzvot, in order to merit the life of the World-to-Come... (Rambam, *Hilchot Teshuva* 9:1). Conversely, Rambam explains that, if we consciously abandon the Torah (G-d forbid) the curses will make it harder for us to perform the mitzvot and earn our eternity.

### Closeness to the Divine and Higher Consciousness – The Greatest Reward

Yet, there is a view among our sages that focuses on the importance of mindful living in the present moment, gleaning the reward for the mitzvot in This World. Unlike the Rambam, Rabbi Yehuda HaLevi emphasizes that the goal of keeping the Torah is to become close with Hashem in This World. The Torah’s description of peace and prosperity in This World is not merely a means but rather a depiction of G-dly, holy existence on earth. Although, he predated Rambam from the early Middle Ages, Yehuda HaLevi’s view is surprisingly progressive and in line with seeking connective consciousness, so popular in our New Age. “All the promises imply that we shall become connected with the divine influence by means of prophecy, or something nearly approaching it, and also through our relation to the divine influence, as displayed to us in grand and awe-inspiring miracles. Therefore, we do not find in the Bible: ‘If you keep this law, I will bring you after death into beautiful gardens and great pleasures.’ Rather it states, ‘You shall be my chosen people, and I will be a G-d unto you, who will guide you.’ ...how can they boast of expectations after death to those who enjoy the fulfillment already in life? Is not the nature of the prophets and godly men nearer to immortality than the nature of him who never reached that degree?” (*The Kuzari* 109).

### Communal Reward in This World

How do we resolve the apparent contradiction between the various approaches to the purpose of keeping the Torah and the mitzvot? It seems that the divergent views reflect the different emphasis between the Written Torah, which describes the rewards in This World and the Talmud, which highlights the attainment of ultimate bliss in the World-to-Come as our final goal. These perspectives can refer to the community and the individual respectively. Rav Ahron Soloveitchik explains that on the individual level, "There is no reward for doing a mitzvah in this world" (*Kiddushin* 39b), so as to ensure Freedom of Choice, since, otherwise no one would want to miss a mitzvah. However, a communal reward does not compel individuals to act properly. Therefore, reward and punishment operates on a collective level in This World without detracting from Freedom of Choice. Therefore, when we do a mitzvah, the larger community benefits. Equally, our negative actions affect our community negatively. This is why all the blessings and curses in the Torah are written in plural (Rabbi Avi Weiss, *Parashat Bechukotai, Why Do the Good Suffer?*).

### The Return of the Light of the Divine into the National Vessel

Rav Kook extends this concept further in resolving the various views on the purpose of keeping Torah and mitzvot. In an essay called, *Concerning the Process of Ideas in Israel*, he explains that Jewish existence consists of two basic elements: The 'National idea' and the 'Divine idea.' The 'National idea' propels us to create a society, whereas, the 'Divine idea' is the spirit that moves us to engage the Infinite and bring the presence of the Shechina within the nation. These two concepts are completely interdependent. The spirit of the 'Divine' imbues the 'National' with meaning and height, while the 'National' provides a proper vessel for the nation's mission. However, even when the nation as a whole dwelled in the 'Divine idea,' there were individuals who engaged in idolatry and other spiritual poisons, which caused the 'Divine idea' to rot from within, causing the 'National idea' to become divorced from its G-dliness, so that it eventually fell apart. However, the Divine spark still rested, deep in the recesses of the nation's psyche, waiting to re-emerge. Exile extinguished the 'National idea.' This caused a focus on individualistic tendencies and the obsession with individual salvation and guarantee of personal immortality. The minutiae of law and custom replaced the joy of national experience. After the destruction of the Temple, when the Jewish people no longer lived in their intended environment and capacity as a nation, which sanctifies life on earth and brings divinity into the human experience, the concept of the afterlife of the individual became a major focus in Judaism. In our parasha, the Torah describes the ideal of the Jewish nation (Rav Avigdor Meyerowitz, *Bechukotai* 5772). Now that we have finally returned to our homeland, it is time to focus on recreating the 'National idea' of Israel in which Hashem's prophetic spirit will once again dwell among us. It is time to achieve 'Connected Conscious Community,' reconnecting the 'National' with the 'Divine idea' and thus bridge the worlds by bringing the light of the World-to-Come down into This World through the vessel of the perfected community of Israel.