

PART 24: CHAPTER 4, VERSES 17-21

by Rabbi Yitzchak Schwartz

Verse 17. "Shall mortal man be more just than G-d? Shall a man be more pure than his maker?"

Verse 18. "Behold, he puts no trust in his servants; and his angels he charges with folly:"

Verse 19. "How much more those who dwell in houses of clay, whose foundation is in the dust, who are crushed before the moth?"

Verse 20. "Between morning and evening they are destroyed: they perish for ever without anyone paying heed."

Verse 21. "Is not their excellency which was in them gone away? They die; for they are with wisdom."

Commentary

Here is the conclusion of last weeks lesson: In verses 17-21 the actual prophecy is recorded. In verse 17 the prophecy raises a crucial question; can man be more righteous than G-d? These are words of prophecy and it is unreasonable to interpret them as a facetious provocation. Is man capable of reaching a higher level of morality and justice than his creator?

Intuitive reasoning dictates that no creation can be greater than the force that created it. No computer can know more than the sum-total of information put into it by its human creators. Similarly no human can possibly know more than its Creator. Based on this we can interpret verse 17 like this: Since man cannot have greater knowledge than his Creator, how is it possible for him to be the judge of G-d?

A very wise person once pointed out to me the following observation: One of man's favorite pastimes is to judge G-d. I have often observed the accuracy of this observation. The ability to judge requires depth of wisdom, deliberation, and objectivity. In the best circumstances a human being falls short on all three counts. But when a person suffers physical and emotional pain the possibility to be deliberate and objective in judgement is close to nil.

The *Malbim* explains verse 18 in the following way: G-d has many creatures; planets, stars, and numerous spiritual creatures called *Malachim*=angels (for a discussion on *Malachim* see our lessons #2 and #4). All of these creations have one thing in common; they preform the tasks for which they were created with flawless consistency. They have neither free-will nor an evil inclination that could cause them to deviate from their prescribed duties. Despite all this G-d does not put his total trust in these creations (verse 18).

Some of the commentators explain this in the following way. In addition to their influence and control over all physical phenomena in this world, G-d created these beings to carry out special missions that are necessary from time to time (see lessons #2 and #4). The crucial nature of their missions require that they be given special attributes that exceed the normal capabilities of human beings.

However, despite their superior nature they are in constant need of support and sustenance from G-d. This is the meaning of "he puts no trust in his servants". The most powerful and capable of G-d's creations are beholden to G-d for their ability to fulfill their destiny. They cannot possibly take complete credit for the successful performance of their duties. Even the *Malachim*, despite their near-perfect fulfillment of G-d's will, cannot be the judges of G-d.

In stark contrast to the *Malachim* that are made of pure spiritual matter; the human body is made of inferior physical matter. One area where this can be observed is in the phenomenon that physical matter is in a constant state of motion and change. Despite its solid and fixed appearance physical matter is given to constant change and devolution... "those who dwell in houses of clay, whose foundation is in the dust, who are crushed before the moth". First clay, then dust and finally food for the moth.

The reality of human physicality and free-will excludes the possibility of absolute perfection in almost every area of human endeavor. All the more so this is true in the area of service of G-d. In addition to this we are the recipients of unlimited blessings from G-d. The ever increasing debt of gratitude that we owe G-d for all that we received in the past and constantly continue to receive is enormous. The probability of one being able to repay this debt through flawless compliance with G-d's will is not very high. Even the most righteous will find this exceedingly difficult.

Furthermore, the capricious nature of free-will causes erratic performance in human beings. In comparison to the *Malachim*, man is both unpredictable and undependable. This perspective of man, although harsh, demonstrates that he is totally unqualified to play the part of the judge of G-d.

Rashi takes a different approach to verse 18. He interprets the servants mentioned therein to be the righteous. G-d does not put his trust in the righteous means that their past performance, as perfect as it may have been, does not guarantee that they will continue to do so in the future. G-d's desire is that they finish their lives with an unspoiled record. In order to ensure this He may remove them from this world before their predestined time.

The *Malbim* points out in verse 19 that the body of man is described as a "house of clay". Just as a house, or any other possession, is external to one's being the essence of a human being is the soul not the body. But due to the negative influence of the 'house' on its 'occupant' man inevitably falls short of his commitments to G-d.

Summary

Due to the imperfect nature of the human constitution *Elifaz* argues that it is impossible for any man to live an absolutely flawless life. In addition to this the debt of gratitude to G-d is so immense that one can never achieve full repayment. We remain eternally indebted to G-d, never the other way around. Therefore, G-d is justified in exercising judgement even upon the most righteous.

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