

PART 25: CHAPTER 4, VERSES 19 - 21

by Rabbi Yitzchak Schwartz

19. *"How much more those who dwell in houses of clay, whose foundation is in the dust, who are crushed before the moth?"*
20. *"Between morning and evening they are destroyed: they perish for ever without anyone paying heed."*
21. *"Is not their excellency which was in them gone away? They die; for they are with wisdom."*

Commentary:

Rashi interprets verse 20 in the following way: G-d may choose to punish a person in sudden severity; "Between morning and evening they are destroyed" means that the destruction of the guilty is sudden and swift. In light of this we can understand the conclusion "they perish for ever without anyone paying heed." The punishment is delivered in such rapid intensity that they have no opportunity to repent.

The commentary of the Metzudos Dovid takes a different approach to this verse and the previous one. Accordingly, the "house of clay, whose foundation is dust" is an evaluation of the inferior nature of the human being. The very nature of physical matter calls for decay and decomposition. Even the Malachim, who are made of a refined spiritual matter, cannot lay claim to perfection. How then can man [Iyov] entertain the notion that he has achieved a level of righteousness that gives him license to accuse G-d of inequity? How can man possibly claim to achieve perfection in the face of G-d, the paragon of all perfection? The physical make-up of man combined with his unbridled thirst to indulge in physical pleasures distinguishes him from all other life forms. Man alone has the peculiar characteristic to inflict physical and emotional damage upon himself in pursuit of his lustful desires. This relentless insanity often drives him to the brink of self-destruction: "Between morning and evening they are destroyed." Man is oblivious to the imminent debacle that he faces; "they perish forever without anyone [even themselves] paying heed".

The Malbim takes quite a different approach to verse 20. According to this interpretation verse 20 refers to the righteous. G-d prefers to give them punishment in this world rather than an eternal punishment in the world to-come. In comparison with the boundlessness of eternity this world is no more than a short lapse of time, no more than the time that separates the morning from the evening.

The translation of verse 21 is problematic "Is not their excellency which was in them gone away? They die; for they are with wisdom."

The word excellency in this context makes little sense to the average reader. A more appropriate translation would be wealth or possessions. Furthermore, the ending "for they are with wisdom" should read; they are *without* wisdom. G-d prefers to take away a persons wealth and possessions rather than taking his life. Poverty is preferable to death and physical pain is less agonizing than the eternal loss of the soul.

In the outstanding commentary of Rabbi Joseph Kara (one of Rashi's disciples who lived around the end of the 11th century and through the first half of the 12th century) he takes a slightly different approach to the last two verses. The swift destruction of the wicked grants them no respite to arrest their spiritual decline. Since they live without devoting time to evaluate their own performance G-d denies them the opportunity to do so before the severe verdict is executed.

Therefore, Elifaz concludes his prophecy, there is no need to empathize with them since the destruction of their possessions is the result of their own reckless and irresponsible choices. He interprets the last verse something like this: Who is there to remorse over the losses of the wicked, the destruction of their material legacies including their children is the consequence of their own foolishness. They did not use their G-d-given wisdom during their lifetimes to return to the ways of righteousness, they are victims of their own wickedness.

Mazel tov on the conclusion of chapter 4!

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