CHAPTER 8, LAW 6(B) - PHYSICAL WORLD TO COME?

by Rabbi Dovid Rosenfeld

Perhaps this goodness [of the World to Come] will appear light in your eyes. Perhaps you will think that there is no reward for the [fulfillment of the] mitzvos (commandments) and a person's being whole in the ways of truth except his eating and drinking good food, having sex with beautiful figures, wearing embroidered linen clothes, living in ivory dwellings, using silver and gold utensils, and the like -- just as the idiotic, foolish Arabs who are steeped in immorality.

But the Sages and those possessing knowledge know that all such matters are things of emptiness and vanity, of no long-term value (lit., 'without hope'). Such things we would not even consider very good in this world if not for the fact that we posses physical bodies. All such things relate to the needs of the body; the soul neither yearns for nor desires them -- except in order [to take care of] the needs of its body, so that it will have what it wants and remain healthy. And in the time when there will be no body, all such things will become void.

[Rather,] the truly good [state] in which the soul will be in the World to Come is impossible to comprehend and know in this world, for we know only bodily pleasures in this world, and they are what we desire. But the good [of the World to Come] is extremely good. It has no equivalent among the pleasures of this world except allegorically.

But in a true sense, for us to compare (lit., 'evaluate') the spiritual pleasures of the hereafter to the pleasures of the body in his world of eating and drinking is inaccurate (lit., 'is not so'). Rather, that good is great beyond comprehension, evaluation and imagination. This is as David said, 'How great is Your good which You have hidden for those who fear You, have You done for those who trust in You' (Psalms 31:20). (I.e., the good is "hidden" and indescribable.)

Last time we discussed the basic contrast between the Jewish view of the World to Come versus that of a competing religion (which shall remain nameless). As the Rambam states, the logical superiority of our position is so self-evident that anyone "possessing knowledge" (i.e., with brains) will readily dismiss such a vacuous view of paradise. As alluring as it may at first sound to physical beings like us, it is quite clear upon reflection that nothing this world has to offer would satisfy us for an eternity. In fact, it wouldn't take very long for us to become utterly disgusted with such an empty, dissolute, indulgent existence.

This week I would like to point out what I feel is a fascinating further insight into the World to Come -- one I almost didn't catch myself until I read the Rambam's words more carefully.

The Rambam wrote above: "[Rather,] the truly good [state] in which the soul will be in the World to Come is impossible to comprehend and know in this world, for we know only bodily pleasures in this world, and they are what we desire."

After reflection, I realized there is something very peculiar about this sentence. Is it really true that all we know in this world are physical pleasures? I think we're all mature enough to recognize much higher pleasures even in this world -- building a loving relationship, having a heart-to-heart talk, viewing beautiful scenery, being in touch with ourselves, achieving our goals, devoting ourselves to a worthy cause, etc. (See here for R. Noach Weinberg's famous "Five Levels of Pleasure.") As we all know, when we think of the types of pleasure available to us in this world, physical pleasures rate fairly low. We might even dismiss them as completely illusory -- giving us a quick high while leaving us feeling utterly empty after.

If so, how can the Rambam state that the only pleasures we know in this world are bodily? I can't imagine the Rambam was being careless with his words. Students of the Rambam knows that that basically **never** occurs.

I would therefore like to suggest the following. (What follows is only my own suggestion; anyone with a different insight should feel free to write back.) I believe the pleasures of the World to Come will be the spiritual equivalent of the physical pleasures of this world. They are therefore the only ones relevant to mention when the Rambam contrasts the pleasures of this world with those of the next one.

Now, of course, I need to qualify this immediately. The Rambam just rejected the notion of a physical paradise as something no intelligent person would subscribe to. Even allegorically comparing the hereafter to physical delights is entirely wrong and misleading. As the Rambam wrote in the same breath, there is not the slightest equivalence between the one and the other. They are different in kind; never the twain shall meet.

Yet I believe we can take the following insight from the Rambam. The pleasure of the World to Come is not some warm, fuzzy feeling -- the type of vague, good feeling we might get from acting virtuously or feeling good about ourselves. It is ecstasy. It is a concrete sensation of rapture. We will be bathed in the Divine Presence. We will be overwhelmed with the pleasure of connection with G-d. It will be real pleasure, inside and out -- no mere nice dictum about virtue being its own reward.

Again, we must be careful here not to start couching our description in physical terms. As above, that would fall so pathetically short as to take us in the completely wrong direction. The Rambam told us that there is no way we can achieve the slightest comprehension of the World to Come in the physical world.

Yet, at the same time, the only sort of pleasures which even **might** be compared to the World to Come are physical ones. Only they penetrate us on all levels, down to the physical. Only they convey the requisite sense of rapture. (Interestingly, at the final stage of existence -- the

Resurrection -- we will have physical bodies again -- and be able to enjoy closeness to G-d on every level of reality.) Likewise, when the elders were granted a vision of G-d at Mount Sinai, the Torah describes it as follows: "They gazed at G-d, and they ate and drank" (Exodus 24:11). Many explanations have been offered for this packed statement. But on one level the message is clearly that seeing G-d can only be described metaphorically in terms of physical ecstasy.

Thus, to wrap up, although the pleasures of the physical world do not help us conceptualize the delights of heaven in the slightest, at least they are on the right track. They serve as a wrong but accurate metaphor (if that made any sense) of the true reward G-d grants the righteous. For the World to Come does not consist of some refined, spiritual sense of well-being -- our sitting around feeling "good about ourselves" that we were good little boys and girls in this world. It will be something beyond anything we can comprehend or imagine. It will be electricity, a whole-person experience, ecstasy at the highest level. It will be bliss.

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