

CHAPTER 9, LAW 1(C) - PHYSICAL AND SPIRITUAL REWARDS

by Rabbi Dovid Rosenfeld

[NOTE: The first part of this law, as translated in the past class, posed the question why the Torah promises us reward and punishment in this world -- plenty vs. famine, peace vs. war, health vs. sickness etc. -- if the true reward we will receive will be in the World to Come.]

All of these matters (i.e., rewards and punishments of this world) truly did and will come about. And when we fulfill all the Torah's mitzvos (commandments), we will be granted all the good of this world. [Conversely,] when we transgress [the commandments], all the evils written [in the Torah] will happen to us.

Even so, such good is not the final reward for the mitzvos, nor are such evils the final vengeance which will be exacted from one who transgresses all the mitzvos. Rather, the following is the explanation.

The Holy One gave us the Torah; it is the Tree of Life. Anyone who fulfills all that is written in it and knows it thoroughly (lit., 'knows it with total, correct knowledge') will merit through it life in the World to Come. According to the quantity of his deeds and the greatness of his wisdom will he merit it.

The Torah promises us [further] that if we fulfill [the commandments] with joy and in good spirits, and we meditate in its wisdom constantly, G-d will remove from us all those matters which prevent us from fulfilling it -- such as sickness, war, famine, and the like. G-d will [instead] shower us with all the good things, which will 'strengthen our hands' to observe the entire Torah, such as plenty, peace, and quantities of silver and gold, in order that we not toil all of our days for matters which the body requires. Rather, we will recline (lit., 'sit') free to study wisdom and fulfill the mitzvos so that we will merit life in the World to Come.

So too is it stated in the Torah, after it promised the good of this world, 'And it will be righteousness for us [for we will take heed to observe all of these commandments]...' (Deut. 6:25). (In other words, G-d's granting us comfort in this world is an act of righteousness toward us, since we will then be able to fulfill His commandments and earn reward.)

So too, the Torah informs us that if we forsake the Torah purposely and concern ourselves with passing vanities, as the verse states, 'Jeshurun waxed fat and kicked...' (Deut. 32:15), then the True Judge will remove from those forsakers all the blessings of this world which strengthened their hands to 'kick'. [Instead], He will bring upon them all the evils which will interfere with their

acquiring the World to Come in order that they perish in their wickedness.

This is as it is written in the Torah, 'And you will serve your enemies whom G-d will send against you.' 'On account of [the fact that] you did not serve the L-rd your G-d through happiness and goodheartedness [when you had] much of all' (Deut. 28:47-48).

The explanation of all such blessings and curses [of the Torah] are along these lines. Meaning, if you serve G-d in joy and you observe His ways, He will shower upon you these blessings and distance the curses so that you will be free to grow wise in Torah and involve yourself in it. [This is all] in order that you merit life in the World to Come, it will be good for you in a world which is all good, and you will lengthen days in a world which is eternally long. Thus, you will be found to merit two worlds -- a good life in this world which leads to the life of the World to Come. For if one does not acquire wisdom and good deeds here, he will have no way to merit [the hereafter], as it is stated, 'For there is no action, reckoning, understanding, or wisdom in the grave' (Ecclesiastes 9:10).

And if you forsake G-d and err with food, drink, immorality, and the like, He will bring upon you all these curses and remove all the blessings until your days are spent in agitation and fear, and your heart will not be free nor your body healthy (lit., 'whole') enough to perform the mitzvos. [This is] in order that you be lost from the World to Come. In the end you will lose both worlds, for when a person is preoccupied in this world with sickness, war and hunger, he does not involve himself with wisdom or mitzvos, through which one merits life in the World to Come.

This week's law is the longest we've ever covered -- sorry for the length of it. The Rambam discusses the following issue. Being that the true reward we will receive for our good deeds will be in the World to Come, what role do the Torah's many promises of blessings in the physical world fulfill? The promises the Torah does offer -- rain, crops, peace, health -- are no small matter to be sure, but we would not think of them as "reward" per se. They are not the infinite bliss of Heaven -- and are practically meaningless in comparison. We would certainly hope G-d is not offering us such trifling creature comforts in lieu of eternal reward. If so, where do they fit in?

(For the past two classes, we discussed a related issue -- why the Written Torah is so frustratingly silent about the World to Come. Being that the Oral Torah teaches us that our actual reward will be in the hereafter, why did the Written Torah leave out something so basic to Jewish theology, leaving so critical a fundamental for the Oral Law?)

The Rambam answers as follows. The blessings of this world are not reward per se. They will in no way detract from the true reward we will receive for our good deeds in the hereafter. Rather, they are a means. If we observe the mitzvos, G-d will make life in the physical world easier for us. We will be blessed with peace and plenty -- and so we'll be able to devote ourselves more fully to G-d and His Torah.

If, however, we disobey G-d's will, the opposite will occur. We will be forced to endure war, sickness, famine, unemployment, etc. -- and we will become preoccupied with survival and making ends

meet. We will have neither the time nor the peace of mind to think about G-d and religion, and as a result we will wallow in our sinfulness. We squandered the opportunity to serve G-d "through happiness and goodheartedness [when you had] much of all." And since we showed no interest in serving G-d when we had the chance, He will withdraw His divine support, instead allowing earth's cruel elements to close in, keeping the sinner in his sinful fate till his miserable end.

I should add that the Rambam is discussing the world on an ideal level -- and this is no doubt the way it will operate after the Messiah arrives. But it should be mentioned that practically speaking, many other considerations factor into how G-d runs the world. In fact, in other places the Sages state quite the opposite -- that G-d makes life **harder** for the righteous -- in order to pay off their sins in this world; and vice versa for the wicked (see Talmud Brachos 7a). And at times G-d challenges the righteous with trials He sees them great enough to withstand or even as an atonement for their generation.

The Mishna ([Pirkei Avos 4:19](#)) goes so far as to state that we simply cannot understand "the peace of the wicked nor the suffering of the righteous." As we all know, G-d at times seems to deal most harshly with those most precious to Him. "For the one He loves G-d rebukes" (Proverbs 3:12). So many factors enter into G-d's inscrutable judgment that the theoretical rules the Sages state in various places are virtually impossible to apply.

Speaking more practically, if G-d does beset any of us with suffering or troubles, we should not necessarily take this to mean G-d does not care for our divine service and so is making it hard for us to serve Him. Perhaps G-d has determined that the best way for us to devote ourselves to Him right now is through the acceptance of His will in suffering. Finding G-d in suffering may well be a much greater form of devotion than going about our everyday affairs -- even if we do perform many good deeds throughout our day. We should never attempt too hard to "figure out" G-d's intentions -- although of course we must always be attuned to the messages He sends us. We must simply lovingly accept His decrees, acknowledging that only He knows best.

The Rambam's basic approach to this issue fits beautifully with our discussion of the past few weeks. As we explained, the Written Torah is the story of the physical world -- how it was created near perfection, how it fell, and the development of a plan to bring it back to its perfected state. In that light, the mitzvos (commandments) are not presented as means of earning the World to Come (which the Written Torah virtually never mentions), but as our means of perfecting the physical world -- of bringing it back to its ideal state.

Likewise, the Rambam here tells us that the physical rewards offered by the Written Torah are not even "reward" per se. That is for the World to Come. The Torah is rather telling us that if we serve G-d, the physical world will function properly, enabling us to serve G-d even better. In other words, our acts will perfect the physical world -- making it a reflection of the spiritual, working in perfect harmony with it.

I would like to close with one fascinating inference in the Rambam's words. The Rambam more than once stated above that G-d will grant us the creature comforts of this world only if we serve Him with joy. Only if we're happy about serving G-d will the physical world cooperate and make our divine service easier. Why is happiness such an integral ingredient of this?

I suppose the simplest answer is that if we only reluctantly served G-d to begin with, He will not make life any easier for us. We didn't really **want** to serve G-d in the first place; He will see no compelling reason to make it easier for us to do that which we really didn't want to do.

But I believe the message is more profound. Let's say a person has the following attitude: "I really don't find mitzvos and the Torah lifestyle enjoyable. It actually makes life quite miserable and repressive for me. But I'll force myself to do it anyway because I want a piece of the World to Come."

(By the way, I don't believe any of us ever **talk** that way. But at times our manner and behavior communicate such an unspoken message.)

What is lacking about such an attitude? Such a person sees mitzvah observance as things of the next world alone. They are not meaningful, fulfilling, enjoyable acts in this world. They are simply behaviors we must endure in order to earn the World to Come. And, tells us the Rambam, if that is our attitude, that is exactly the way our mitzvos will work for us. We did not see them as acts of beauty in this world -- and so they will not perfect this world. Perhaps such a person will receive a share of the hereafter for his deeds, but the physical plane will remain unimproved and unaffected.

Needless to say, that attitude woefully misses G-d's true message to mankind. G-d is perfect -- and so are His commandments. G-d's mitzvos do not only bring us good in the next world. They are perfect on all levels of reality. They offer man the most rewarding lifestyle in this world as well. And if we properly understand and observe them, they will grant us the ultimate fulfillment.

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