

CHAPTER 2, MISHNA 20: THE REWARD OF THE TORAH

by Rabbi Dovid Rosenfeld

Rabbi Tarfon said: The day is short, the work is great, the workers are lazy, the reward is great, and the Master of the house presses.

This mishna might seem an oversimplification, but when we think about it, it very accurately sums up the story of life. Life is short and there is much to be done. Yet the workers are lazy. Few of us live our days with the requisite sense of urgency. We look for ways to shirk responsibility, to pass the buck to the next guy. We hope the world will become a better place, yet we wait for someone else to take the initiative. We likewise allow ourselves to be distracted with endless diversions, rarely allowing ourselves to think about just who we are and what G-d wants of us. We spend most of our energy worrying about our wealth, popularity, pleasures, social standing, etc. Yet G-d presses. Not only does He offer great rewards, but He demands that we make something of ourselves.

R. Tarfon writes with a sense of urgency. The story of life really is this simple -- even if we make it much more complex. We might say that more than any one specific deed or action, G-d ultimately and primarily asks but one thing of us: that we wake up! We must see life for all its significance. If we see life as an opportunity to achieve and sanctify ourselves, the rest will flow. It will be hard work, but at least we will have that vision for success. If, however, we refuse to face life, the Master of the house might have to press -- and press hard. G-d blessed us with wonderful talents and wonderful opportunities, but neither does He allow us to shirk them. And we would do well to remind ourselves of this before G-d Himself finds the need.

The commentator Rabbeinu Yonah illustrates our mishna with a parable -- and yet another telling oversimplification. (And as with all classical Jewish parables, it begins with a king and his subject....) :-) The king wanted to reward his faithful subject who had done him some special service. And so, he rewarded him by making the following offer: "I'm opening my treasure house to you. Whatever you can carry out in the next 3 hours is yours." Needless to say, such a subject would not take coffee breaks, daydream, doze off at his desk, surf the web, check his stocks or the latest scores, etc. For when the rewards are so patently evident, you would never waste a precious moment of life.

(I was once told that a typical white-collar employee puts in approximately five productive hours during an eight hour workday. I wonder how much the advent of the Internet has altered that equation. In fact, much of what we consider "work" today is actually Internet/computer-generated tasks -- reading news feeds, updating on-line schedules, responding to emails, etc. My first job in high-tech (as a summer student, 1989) was actually from the days before email was ubiquitous, let

alone smartphones -- and I actually had to **work** all day. Imagine -- a computer programmer without email. People today can't think of a **janitor** without email.)

And further, you would not find the "work" of carrying out precious golden vessels tedious or tiring. You would enjoy the backbreaking effort -- every minute of it! You wouldn't want it to end! You wouldn't see it as a necessary evil in order to earn your eventual reward. It would be bringing you closer to your reward -- and you would see it clearly. Life would be so exciting and fulfilling you would not lose sight of its purpose for one instant. And as one rapt in a challenging video game, you would relish every second of it.

R. Zev Leff (well-known educator and lecturer, Rav of Moshav Mattisyahu, Israel) has his own such illustration, same basic idea but perhaps closer to home. When he was growing up in America, a woman had become the millionth customer at the local grocery chain. Her prize? 15 minutes of free shopping, anything she could grab and put in a cart would be hers. As to be expected, on the day of the big spree, she came prepared. I'm sure she had gotten into shape in advance. She wore special running shoes, she had a map of the store and aisles attached to a cap on her head, a planned route, means of pushing multiple carts, etc. Every second counted and she was ready to maximize to the fullest.

This, however, begins to become depressing. How often do we live our lives with that sense of urgency -- that every second could be another second of Torah study, and that every diversion draws us away from our true mission in life? Yes, this is an oversimplification -- and perhaps even a dangerous one. No one can live like that millionth customer his or her entire life. Human beings do not function well under stress, neither physically nor psychologically. We need to let up, to have diversions, to at times enjoy ourselves and forget about all that urgency of life. Otherwise, we will burn ourselves out and be neither credit to ourselves nor to our G-d.

Yet now and then we do need to be reminded of R. Tarfon's message. Life really is that intense. There is so much to be done and so precious little time. Vacations and breathing space aside, life really is a fast-paced and never-ending struggle to achieve.

There is a deeper idea here, however. "The reward is great" is not simply a matter of G-d showering heavenly bounty upon us -- much as that shopper scooping up myriad cans of sardines. Reward is not some magical spiritual currency G-d bestows upon man for his service. Rather, it is the natural outcome of proper behavior. Good deeds are not only G-d's will; they are inherently good -- and they transform both ourselves and the world around into a more beautiful place. We serve G-d not only with a sense that He will open up His treasure chest for us, but that we will have transformed ourselves into people worthy of such treasure.

The Talmud (Pesachim 68b) writes that we are obligated to celebrate the holiday of Shavuot ("The Feast of Weeks," sometimes translated as Pentecost, commemorating the revelation at Mt. Sinai and G-d's giving us the Torah) with feasting. (This stands in contrast to many of the other holidays, where

according to some opinions one may celebrate in a spiritual manner alone -- through prayer and Torah study.) Likewise, R. Yosef told his servant to prepare him a choice calf for Shavuot, for "if not for this day, there are many Yosef's (Joe's) in the marketplace."

My teacher [R. Yochanan Zweig](#) asked, why do we celebrate such a spiritual event as the receiving of the Torah with physical delights? Shouldn't we show our appreciation for our Torah through **studying** it and becoming more **spiritual** people? And here we are, eating cheesecake!

R. Zweig's answer demonstrates the true profundity of R. Tarfon's "the reward is great." G-d wanted us to realize just what Torah is all about. The Torah is not only a matter of performing difficult mitzvos (commandments) in order that we earn reward in the World to Come. It is not even a matter of giving our lives needed structure and discipline -- also quite necessary for our emotional health and well-being. Rather, the Torah is entirely in harmony with how we want to be. The purpose of the Torah is to get us in touch with ourselves, to give us mitzvos which bring out our personalities and allow true self-expression. Judaism, if practiced correctly, is happiness. It is self-fulfillment -- spiritual, emotional, and physical. It should not make us feel we are sacrificing for G-d or for the World to Come. It is living life to the fullest.

For this reason, G-d instructs us to eat on Shavuot. Celebrating spiritually is not enough. We must eat -- and eat well. We must celebrate the Torah with the sense that it brings happiness on all planes of existence, and that the mitzvos are entirely in harmony with our natures. The Torah is not G-d's imposing His will upon His subjects, forcing us to restrict our behavior and discipline ourselves unnaturally. G-d is not forcing us to change our characters. He is causing us bring them out. With Torah all is in harmony. We are whole human beings. The Torah has made us ourselves.

This is the true intent of "the reward is great." Heavenly reward hardly means cans of sardines or golden treasure. It is reward in its truest sense: the complete harmony of body and soul, and the continued growth and progression from happiness in this world to the ultimate reward of the next.

Yet at the same time, "the Master of the house presses." The potential for reward is immense, yet the consequences of failure are equally calamitous. If the reward is nothing less than self-fulfillment, G-d can ask us for nothing less. It is not optional: golden treasures to be had at our will and whim. It is life. And so G-d presses us. He demands that we realize our potential. In Deuteronomy (30:19), G-d presented us with the ultimatum: "I call the heavens and earth as witnesses before you: life and death I have placed before you, the blessing and the curse, and you shall choose life..." G-d offers us the world -- but in this He does not allow us to settle for anything less. Let us not wait for Him to remind us.

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