

CHAPTER 4, MISHNA 22(A): WHAT IS THE WORLD TO COME? PART I

by Rabbi Dovid Rosenfeld

He [Rabbi Yaakov] used to say, one hour of repentance and good deeds in this world is better than the entire life of the World to Come. And one hour of bliss in the World to Come is better than the entire life of this world.

This week's mishna provides us with an important understanding of the nature of both this world and the next. It also serves as a continuation of last week's mishna, also authored by R. Yaakov. Last week we learned that this world is the entrance chamber and the World to Come is the banquet hall. This mishna deepens our understanding of these concepts and enables us to recognize the greatness of each world in its own unique way.

To fully understand our mishna, we must address a question every thinking Jew must ask at one time or another in his life -- certainly in his advanced years, but hopefully in his younger (and tragically, sometimes only on his death bed): What exactly is the World to Come? We know it exists and that the belief in it is fundamental to Jewish thought. We also know that it is the place of reward and punishment -- and, as we learned last week, it is the place where we come face to face with our Creator. Yet what exactly is it? What will it be like? How will reward and punishment be meted out? Is it in some way a continuation of our lives here or a wholly different experience? Do we have a point of reference? Is there anything we can compare it to? How do we prepare for it? Actually, are we sure we **want** it?

(I believe a non-Jewish (presumably Christian) comedian posed a similar question: "Who really wants to have a harp and wings and fly from cloud to cloud?" Is that all we're looking forward to? For that matter, Islam compares to us even more pathetically. It so cheapens the concept of a hereafter as to imagine it as a large harem (of 70 or so virgins -- I'm not sure what they promise women) ;-). (This, by the way, might explain how they convince teenagers to blow themselves up for the holy cause.) Pardon my saying it, but it reflects such a shallow understanding of the immortality of the soul to see eternity through the eyes of physical lust. As a marketing tool (if you're trying to sell your religion to others and have the luxury of inventing whatever you like) it may prove effective. But as the word of G-d, it is a sad commentary indeed on the human corruption of truth.)

Well, we've posed a crucial question. Unfortunately, however, the Sages provide us with decidedly less by way of clear and definitive answer. The Talmud tells us: "All of the prophets prophesied for

the Days of the Messiah alone. But regarding the World to Come, '...an eye has not seen, other than the L-rd's, what He will do for those who hope in Him' (Isaiah 64:3)" (Berachos 34b). Elsewhere, the Talmud states, "The World to Come has no eating, drinking, reproduction, commerce, jealousy, hatred, or rivalry. Rather, the righteous sit with their crowns on their head, enjoying the shine of the Divine Presence, as it says 'And they saw the L-rd, and they ate and drank' (Exodus 24:11)" (Berachos 17a).

Maimonides elaborates on the above passage -- slightly at least (what follows is a free translation): The true good which is reserved for the righteous is known as the World to Come. It is life without death and good without evil.... The World to Come does not contain within it corporeal existence. Rather, the souls of the righteous will exist without physical form, as the angels. Therefore, none of the physical experiences or occurrences with which we are familiar will apply -- eating, drinking, sleeping, standing, sitting, etc. And that which the Sages described the righteous as 'sitting' and having 'crowns on their heads' is metaphorical. 'Sitting' implies existence without exertion or hardship. 'Crowns' imply the wonderful, exhilarating knowledge through which they have earned closeness to G-d. Finally, 'enjoying the shine of the Divine Presence' means they will be able to comprehend the truth of G-d in ways wholly unattainable to us while in our dark and lowly bodies (Mishne Torah Hil' Teshuva 8:1-2 -- see archives page [here](#)).

(Incidentally, neither is it entirely clear **when** the righteous will attain this blissful state. What seems the consensus is that we will **not** achieve this immediately after death. We will then be in the "World of Souls" (Olam haNeshamos), which though pleasurable will basically be a holding pen until the Resurrection of the Dead and the ultimate Day of Judgment. (Many of us will have to undergo purgatory (Gehinnom, Hell) as atonement for our sins before being permitted to enter the World of Souls.) Beyond that, however, we'll just have to wait and see.)

So we know very little about the World to Come. We know it is the only true place of reward, as we learned last week, "There is no reward for good deeds in this world" (Hullin 142a). (What we receive here -- a good salary, a good house, etc. -- can hardly be called "reward". The Sages view such gifts more as a granting of favorable circumstances to enable us to continue serving G-d.) This week's mishna also tells us that the pleasure of the World to Come is greater than anything and everything this world has to offer. Yet we are told almost nothing about its true nature. It seems not so much that G-d intentionally preserved it as a mystery to keep us in suspense. It is rather that by definition the World to Come is incomprehensible to physical beings. It is a place of infinity and eternity, and as such finite human beings simply cannot comprehend it. In our present state we simply do not possess the requisite faculties.

In a way this is good, even if a little less than satisfying. If the good of the World to Come were in some way limited enough to be understandable to us -- if it meant a very large chocolate sundae -- it could not be all that great. It certainly could not be infinite. We've seen the pleasures this world has to offer. They would hardly satisfy us for an eternity. Knowing, however, that the pleasures are

wholly unimaginable to us tells us that what awaits the faithful is infinitely good. G-d will reward us with something which is infinite. And this can be one thing alone: G-d Himself.

Yet Jewish thinkers claim that there is a faint approximation to the pleasure of the World to Come -- one which we **do** experience in this world -- and one which relates to our mishna's description of this world. But in the interest of brevity, we'll discuss that G-d willing next week. Guess I'll have to keep **you** in suspense a little longer. ;-) Till then!

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