

# CHAPTER 4, MISHNA 22(B): WHAT IS THE WORLD TO COME? PART II

*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.***

Last week we began discussing the concept of the World to Come. We saw that the Sages -- at least in the revealed Torah -- tell us precious little about what the World to Come will actually be like. As we explained, this is not simply in order to keep us in suspense. It is because the pleasures of the World to Come are infinite, and as physical beings we do not even possess the faculties to truly comprehend them.

Yet we are told that it is possible to relate in a small way to the ultimate pleasure of the World to Come, to catch a faint glimpse of its infinite bounty. To understand this, we must pose an even more fundamental question: Why does G-d require us to **earn** our share in the World to Come? If G-d is infinitely good and the creation of the world was an act of goodness (which He is and it was -- these are axiomatic to our understanding of a perfect G-d), why not reward us right away? Why does G-d have us suffer so many years in this world serving Him -- or not serving Him -- and only afterwards reward us? Why expose us to so much evil, temptation and pain beforehand? Wouldn't it be an even greater act of goodness to reward us immediately?

The answer is that reward which is unearned is not reward; it is embarrassment. If G-d would "reward" us by giving us the World to Come for nothing, we would not enjoy it. We would feel the same shame and humiliation we experience in this world when we are forced to live off of handouts and feel dependent upon others. King Solomon wrote, "He who hates gifts shall live" (Proverbs 15:27). Even in the physical realm, earning our own livelihood gives us a sense of fulfillment. Living through the support of others creates within us a crushing sense of dependence and subservience -- described by King Solomon as a lack of "life". Such a source of income would never truly satisfy us. The Sages state: If one eats at another's table his mind is never truly at ease (Avos d'Rav Nassan 31:1). We could certainly never look our supporter in the face.

But it is even deeper than this. In the physical realm we are familiar with such concepts as the Law of Conservation of Energy. Energy cannot be created from nothing (ever since G-d's initial act of creation). It can be concentrated, diffused, directed, and converted (even into matter if you have

enough of it and you know what you're doing), but it can never be created or destroyed. The same is true in the realm of the spiritual. Reward which is unearned is not only too embarrassing to accept. It by definition cannot exist. G-d cannot, so to speak, create reward out of nothing. If it is earned, the reward is the natural outcome and extension of our own efforts: it is our own independent creation. If we have done nothing, reward does not and cannot follow.

Thus, to truly reward us, G-d had to give us the opportunity to earn our reward. To allow for this, He created a physical world -- one of darkness and distance from Him (or at least apparent distance from Him). Serving G-d would now be a challenge. We would have to discover G-d through physical layers of separation and indifference. We would have free will -- the possibility for evil and destruction would exist -- and we would have to exercise that freedom with care to come closer to G-d. In this way our lives and actions would become meaningful, and our ultimate reward will be ours. We will have a true and eternal existence -- knowing that we have earned it through our own everlasting accomplishments.

I'd like to take this one step deeper. There is an even more fundamental dilemma here Man as a created being is not truly "real". If a person is created by G-d and never achieves on his own, he is no more than an extension of G-d. He has no more independent existence than a painting has over its painter. And he will live with a crushing sense of inexistence. I do not truly have reality; all I am is a projection of a bit of G-d's wisdom and might. But I am not **real**. And having a functioning heart and brain fashioned by G-d does not really alter that.

And now we arrive at the crux of the issue. We began by stating that unearned reward embarrasses its recipient. We then stated that in a logical sense, there is not even such a thing as unearned reward: it cannot be created out of nothing. On the deepest level, however, if I have never done anything to justify my existence, I am not even **real**. I am a passive, created being, nothing more than an extension of the G-d who created me. And this is the crushing and debilitating sense of inexistence which plagues and hounds the truly thinking human being to no end. (It was even the sense that drove Adam and Eve to eat of the Tree of Knowledge -- but for a separate discussion.)

We can now begin to appreciate what the World to Come truly is. It is not only a place of reward. It is a place of existence. Until I have achieved and justified myself, I am not truly real. But when out of my own volition I choose good where I could have chosen evil, I have made something for myself. I have struggled and won. And this not only earns me reward; it grants me existence. I am not only a created being; **I** have accomplished! My deeds are my own! **G-d** didn't do them for me! They are my own creation! And this grants me reality. I live forever because I have performed deeds of immortality. I am -- and there can be no greater joy.

And when we have earned our existence, we can enjoy a relationship with G-d. A painting cannot have a "relationship" with its painter. But as independent beings, we can love and be loved by G-d. The World to Come is the place of such closeness. We exist and are eternal -- and so, we can bask

in ecstasy in the glow of the Divine Presence.

This is a feeling we can experience -- in fact which can sustain us -- in this world as well. In serving G-d and doing acts of goodness we can know that we are creating our own reality. We are accomplishing by performing the mitzvos (commandments) -- the precise actions which G-d has told us are eternal and everlasting. We make ourselves "real" and in the grandest possible way. For we are not only accomplishing for ourselves. We are doing nothing short of partnering with G-d in bringing the world to its fulfillment.

At last we return to our mishna. This is the true message of R. Yaakov. On the one hand (looking at his second statement first), "One hour of bliss in the World to Come is better than the entire life of this world." This world has nothing to offer in terms of eternity and closeness to G-d. It is a dark and evil place. If we are fortunate, we will catch passing hints of an eternal Creator. Nor can we really expect to enjoy ourselves all that much (or for very long) down here. Bliss is one thing and one thing alone: closeness to G-d. And this world is simply not the place. (Think of the greatest pleasure you can imagine, multiply it a million times, and you'll still have no inkling...)

Yet, "One hour of repentance and good deeds in this world is better than the entire life of the World to Come." This world has something the next cannot: we **create** our World to Come. The World to Come is bliss, but it is stagnant bliss. We enjoy our accomplishments, but we can no longer accomplish. There are no longer doubts of G-d's existence and a physical body to sublimate. The purpose and reality of existence will be completely clear, but it will be far too late to do anything about it.

But this world, the world of vanity, emptiness and falsehood, allows for such accomplishment. While doubt and challenges still exist, we can perform that "one hour of repentance and good deeds." Our physical existence in many ways is temporal and fleeting -- and carries with it the inescapable sense of eventual doom. But precisely because of this it allows for true fulfillment -- and the creation of that reality which we are yet to enjoy.

*Some of the ideas above may be found in "A World of Love" by R. Aryeh Kaplan (available as part of The Aryeh Kaplan Anthology, published by ArtScroll Mesorah Publications ([www.artscroll.com](http://www.artscroll.com))).*

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