

DA'AT TEVUNOT - SECTION 4: CHAPTER 8

by Rabbi Yaakov Feldman

1.

Like all other instances of justice, Divine Justice is either administered strictly, appropriately, or mercifully. The thing about it though is that there are different rules by which justice is meted out. And they depend on the case itself and its parties, and on other mitigating factors, too (some of which have to do with the case, and others of which have absolutely nothing to do with it but rather with other considerations which the people involved might know nothing about that must be taken into account, as when a judge factors-in character references, past actions, etc.)[1].

In fact, it's mitigating factors that show up the most when it comes to Divine Justice. After all, G-d has His own ways, plans, and expansive and profound intentions that go far beyond any of us, and they always factor into everything He does here on earth.

Ramchal compares that to our own makeup. He points out that while we're all basically alike, we're nonetheless each comprised of unique details. Not only is that so, but each detail might also has a particular quirk. So for example, while the great majority of us have two arms, our right arms don't exactly match our left, and some parts of our left arm, let's say, aren't exactly in synch with the other parts of that very same arm.

The point is that while we all deserve fair and equitable treatment, what's fair to one of us is decidedly unfair to another, and what's indeed fair on the surface of things to two different people in the regular course of things may prove to be unfair to one of them in a certain special situation. And G-d alone knows all of that and contends with it all in His administration of justice in the universe.

At bottom, sometimes we perceive Him as judging a particular situation strictly, other times as mercifully, and other times as simply appropriately. But we're really not privy to the details that factored into that so our experience of what's going on may be askew.

2.

The problem lies in us, to be sure, and not in Him. For, while G-d is always just, we sometimes see that for ourselves, and other times not. Ramchal compares it, interestingly enough, to the differences between our experience of the Shabbat or the Holy Days, and our experience of regular weekdays. Let's explain.

As anyone who has experienced a full and meaningful Shabbat or Yom Tov knows very well, the day

is often electric, warm, and decidedly distinct from regular weekdays. Why is that? Because, as Ramchal explains it, G-d allows His presence to manifest itself more openly in the course of each holy day, which is not the case on weekdays.

For while we can indeed perceive G-d's presence on weekdays (for example, during prayer and Torah study, and as a consequence of deep reflection), we're less likely to perceive it then than we would on Shabbat or Yom Tov, since it's we ourselves who would have to consciously work at it, whereas G-d's presence is more patently manifest on those holy days and we wouldn't have to concentrate upon it as much to recognize it.

And so, just as G-d manifests His presence more so at certain times than at others, He likewise seems to manifest Divine Judgment more openly in certain instances than in others, simply because circumstances demand one degree of manifestation over another.

Just understand that everything that happens to us -- and in fact, everything we're comprised of -- is rooted in G-d's governance and His intentions for the universe.

3.

Recall that the world as we experience it seems to be rooted in darkness and degradation (though it's actually rooted in high Light and spiritual nobility, to be sure). Recall as well that everything in this world was created at G-d's will and bidding. And so while we might certainly experience things as unjust and wrongful, we're to know that things could very well have been openly fair and just from the first, but they weren't set up that way at the outset for a specific reason. And that reason is rooted in wisdom and in our own ultimate needs. So, let's delve into that mystery.

Notes:

[1] Let's follow the flow of ideas here again. The two previous chapters had taken a side path and laid out the five epoch periods of G-d's governance. We now return to certain themes laid out in this section's earlier chapters touching on the makeup and workings of Divine Justice.

And so this and the next few chapters will be returning to ideas offered above that G-d "instituted a system ... of right and wrong as well as appropriate reward and punishment (which) would grant us insight into what would help or harm us spiritually" (4:1:2); that He "interacts with us in infinite numbers of ways, but in general He does so lovingly, firmly, or by a combination of the two" (4:2:2); that "each time G-d interacts with the world we're not only to consider that particular act but everything else connected to it as well.... Because G-d takes all that into account ... when He acts" (4:3:2); that "had he wanted to, G-d could very well have created a ... world in which only good reigned from the first" (4:4:2), and more.

See R' Friedlander's Iyyun #36 here for Kabbalistic references here, as well as R' Shriki's note 117, and R' Goldblatt's notes 3 and 11.

Rabbi Yaakov Feldman has translated and commented upon "The Gates of Repentance", "The Path of the Just", and "The Duties of the Heart" (Jason Aronson Publishers). His works are available in bookstores and in various locations on the Web.