

PARSHAS KI SEITZEI - WHAT'S IN A REVERSAL

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

What's In a Reversal?

Send away the mother and keep the young for yourself, so that it will be good for you, and you will prolong your days.

These two blessings, for all their deceptive simplicity, obscure their true intent. Just what "good" is it that G-d promises for the performance of this mitzvah? Is a long life always a blessing? Why are these promises linked to a mitzvah as difficult to understand as shilu'ach hakein? Do we always witness the fulfillment of this prediction?

In fact, our pasuk does not enjoy a monopoly on announcements of Divine reward. The mitzvah of honoring parents, at least in its second iteration in the Aseres HaDibros of Devarim^[2], offers the same rewards. There, however, the reward of long days takes pride of place, appearing in the pasuk before the promise of Divinely bestowed good. The difference between these two sections is significant.

Chazal took full note of the reversal, as well as some of the problems raised above. In the case of honoring parents, the gemara^[3] defers the fulfillment of the promise of reward to a spiritual mode of existence. Thus, the lengthening of days is seen as occurring in the eternally long soul-world; the good is bestowed in the world of constant good after the resurrection of the dead.

This interpretation ripples across our pasuk, in which the two blessings are reversed from their position in the Decalogue. They must mean something quite different here, and refer to blessings very much of our physical world, not ones of a future, spiritual realm. For this reason "good" precedes "long days" in our pasuk. The Torah first speaks of good in the immediate present, before turning to lengthening our days beyond the present.

What we have, then, is the mitzvah of kibud av linked to a promise of spiritual reward, and shilu'ach hakein attached to material benefit. This is ironic! We would have expected the opposite. Because we can easily relate to the mitzvah of honoring parents, we would think that its reward also be of our own familiar world. Shilu'ach hakein, however, mystifies us. We recognize it as coming from a spiritual realm that we do not grasp. We follow it because Hashem commands us to, not because

we comprehend it. Its other-worldliness would commend its reward to be relegated to a spiritual world in the future.

In fact, the reversal is much of the point. The Torah wishes to emphasize that all mitzvos possess a hidden, spiritual component that relates best to a spiritual existence not of this world. Even the mitzvos that we see as logically compelling for a stable, decent society (like honoring parents) possess this element, and are therefore rewarded in the spirit worlds. The opposite is also true. Mitzvos like shilu'ach hakein which seem to relate only to a hidden, spiritual dimension still have practical impact on the here and now. Those who faithfully perform those mitzvos reap their reward in this world.

Another difference between the two mitzvos concerns the locus of the reward. Kibud av's payoff is not localized; shilu'ach hakein's is promised "on the Land that Hashem promised to your fathers." We might have thought that the more "spiritual" mitzvah would be rewarded specifically in Israel, the most spiritual place on earth, while the benefits of the more "practical" mitzvah would be apparent in all places. Here, too, the Torah corrects our mistaken notions and reveals universal truths. The rational, practical mitzvos, once made part of the Torah, take on hidden, mystical dimensions, which can be appreciated best only in the most spiritual Land; the mitzvos that start out in spiritual realms beyond our comprehension still yield practical benefits in the here and now of ordinary human existence, all over the globe.

While this analysis may be satisfying, it suffers from one major flaw. It only works according to the Tanna of the Mishna in Kiddushin[4] who holds that mitzvos produce tangible benefits in the here-and-now! R. Yaakov, however, disagrees, famously arguing that "there is no reward for mitzvos in this world." (Acts of loving kindness to other human beings are an exception, as the principal is reserved for the world to come, but dividends are paid in this world.) To R. Yaakov, rewards are limited to the world beyond ours. Both shilu'ach hakein and kibud av v'eim promise identical consequences, albeit in olam habo. These two mitzvos serve as illustrations. The underlying principle, however, is universal, and applies to all mitzvos.

Why then does the Torah reverse the order of "good" and "long days" between these mitzvos? We will understand after examining one other teaching of R. Yaakov: "One moment of satisfaction in olam habo is preferable to all life in this world. One moment of Torah and good deeds in this world is preferable to all the life of olam habo[5]." Don't the two statements contradict each other? Which, when all is said and done, is better - time in this world, or the next?

The solution is that the two refer to different people with different attitudes. One person's motivation in serving Hashem is the fear of punishment and expectation of reward. That person clearly defers his enjoyment of this world for the expectation of something even better in the next. His eye is trained on the world beyond. To him, indeed the next world is far superior. In fact, for him - as R.

Yaakov taught - "there is no reward for mitzvos in this world." How could there be? Nothing in this world could possibly compare with the delights of the next.

Another person, however, serves Hashem entirely out of love. He is not interested in or focused upon any reward. His greatest satisfaction is the opportunity to serve Hashem. His pleasure is maximized by giving him more opportunities to perform mitzvos, i.e., in the lengthening of his days. In the next world, there is no such opportunity. For him, there is reward for mitzvos in this world, even according to R. Yaakov!

Do we find any reference to this distinction in the Torah? Indeed we do - once more in a nuance that differentiates between shilu'ach hakein and kibud av v'eim. The latter stresses "as Hashem commanded you." The Torah makes no similar point in regard to shilu'ach hakein. The reason is fairly obvious. People might observe the mitzvah of honoring parents because their personal sense of morality militates for it. The Torah therefore stresses that we ought to observe it because Hashem commands it, not because we intuitively appreciate it. In regard to shilu'ach hakein, no such warning is necessary. We find it puzzling and logically remote. Our only reason to comply is obedience to the Divine Will. We perform the mitzvah either out of fear of Him or love of Him, but it is most definitely Him that we hearken to - not our inner moral voice.

The last pieces now fall into place. One who honors parents purely because of Hashem's command has lifted himself above the ordinary. His relationship with Hashem is predicated upon love, not fear. It is appropriate in his case to promise him a prolonging of his days in this world - because the person who serves Hashem out of love can know no greater reward than to have more time in which to serve Him. Only after this blessing does the Torah also promise him reward in the next world, even though this was not a great concern of his.

Shilu'ach hakein, on the other hand, can be performed by a person trying to avoid punishment by G-d, and looking for reward in the next world. For such a person, prolonging his days in this world is not in itself the reward of choice. He is focused on his quality of life, not its absolute length. The Torah therefore promises him, serially, the best of both worlds. Firstly, he is promised "good" in this world. Next, he is told that his days will be prolonged, not in this world, but in the world to come.

Thus, Hashem accommodates the inner wishes of those who serve Him, rewarding everyone according to what suits them best.

1. Based on Haamek Davar and Harchev Davar, Devarim 22:7

2. Devarim 5:16

3. Kiddushin 39B
 4. Loc. Cit.
 5. Avos 4:17
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