

NOW OR NEVER

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

Listen, O heavens, and I will speak! And let the earth hear the words of my mouth! (Devarim 32:1)

The Talmud says that after history as we know it is said-and-done, the gentile nations of the past will complain to God that they were short-shrifted (Avodah Zarah 3a). They will argue that they lost their chance to go to the World-to-Come because they were not given Torah and mitzvos. Had they received Torah like the Jewish people, they will say, they too would have upheld it and earned their own portions in the World-to-Come.

Right.

"Why did you not clamor for Torah while you were still in the previous world?" God could ask them.

"We would have," they might say, "had we known what it was leading to."

"Why did you not check and find out while you still could? Why didn't you investigate Torah and see why Jews believed in it?"

"Well, ah . . ." they will be forced to say.

In any case, the Talmud continues, God will humor them nonetheless. He will tell them:

"Fools! Only one who prepared from before Shabbos will have what to eat on Shabbos!" (Avodah Zarah 3a)

In other words, God will tell them, just as a Jew had to prepare before Shabbos in order to have cooked food on Shabbos, likewise you had to have to perform mitzvos in the previous world to enjoy their benefit now.

"Nevertheless, I will give to you an easy mitzvah called 'Succah.' Go perform it!" (Avodah Zarah 3a)

This statement causes bells to go off in the Talmud. Mitzvos in the World-to-Come? Not possible, as Rebi Yehoshua explains. The Torah, at the end of Parashas VaEschanan, says that mitzvos can only be performed in this world, not in the World-to-Come. Was God merely playing a joke on them?

The Talmud says no. God doesn't play jokes on His creations.

In any case, the Talmud continues:

Immediately, all the gentiles build succos on their roofs. God however makes the sun beat on them like it does in the heat of summer. [When the heat becomes too intense] the gentiles kick their succos and leave. (Avodah Zarah 3a)

If God does not play tricks on His creations, then why did He make it impossible to fulfill the mitzvah He gave them as a test? As the Talmud points out, even a Jew is allowed to leave the succah in such extreme and uncomfortable conditions. What did God prove?

The Talmud answers:

[A Jew] would leave, but they would not kick the succah [in frustration]. (Avodah Zarah 3a)

The difference between a Jew and a gentile, the Talmud says, is not the mitzvah per se, but each relates to it. What does kicking something in anger reveal? That the person feels betrayed, taken advantage of, cheated. If a Jew is forced out of the succah for reasons beyond his control, he does not feel slighted by God, but reprimanded. He does not see himself as the abused, but as the abuser.

The verse says:

Fortunate is the man whom You, God, chastise, and from Your Torah You teach him. (Tehillim 94:12)

God did not play a trick on the gentiles. He set them straight about Torah and mitzvos. He told them it wasn't the mitzvah itself that counted most, but how the person doing the mitzvah relates to it. This is what Moshe Rabbeinu tried to teach the Jewish people prior to his death when he said:

Now, Israel, what does God, your God, ask of you? Only to fear God, your God . . . (Devarim 10:12)

Isn't fear of God only ONE of 613 mitzvos? What about the other 612 mitzvos?

That was the whole point, Moshe Rabbeinu was teaching. Once a person masters fear of God, the rest of the mitzvos for him become far more "natural." For the person who truly fears God, performing mitzvos becomes second nature, as they will actually become in the Messianic Era when there really will be no yetzer hara anymore (Succah 52a).

A major part of reaching the ultimate level of fear of God is Divine chastisement. We do not know ourselves as well as God does, and only He can set us on the straight path and keep us there. If we don't heed His "advice," how can we possibly achieve personal spiritual perfection?

Kicking the succah on the way out proved to the gentiles that even if they had mitzvos to perform in this world, they would never have achieved the fear of God they are meant to promote. They would not have developed the proper relationship to them, and therefore the mitzvos would not have accomplished what they were meant to develop in the person performing them.

It is one's relationship to mitzvos that really counts the most, as the Talmud may also be alluding to

on a different level. This however is only perceivable after first explaining a concept the Maharal revealed. It is a mind-blowing idea to say the least, and it helps to answer the question the Talmud raises about mitzvos in the World-to-Come.

The halachah of Eruv Tavshillin was created by the rabbis to allow a person to prepare for Shabbos on Yom Tov. In general, one is not allowed to prepare for another day on Yom Tov, only for the day itself. However, sometimes Yom Tom is on Friday, and preparing for Shabbos on Thursday is not always the ideal thing.

Therefore, by preparing an Eruv Tavshillin on Thursday when it is still permissible to cook for Shabbos, a person has essentially begun cooking for Shabbos before Yom Tov. The Eruv is a legal device designed to extend the Shabbos preparation process into Yom Tov so that the cooking can be completed on Friday.

Eruv Tavshillin is an interesting halachah to discuss, but not here. What is important is the idea it teaches, and how it pertains to this discussion, including the mitzvah of Succah. For, just as the walls of the succah enclose that which is within in, likewise does the Eruv Tavshillin enclose Yom Tov within it. One's relationship to mitzvos in this world, it will turn out, will act similarly with respect to the Messianic Era as well.

The halachah says that an Eruv Tavshillin allows cooking for Shabbos at a time when it is not otherwise permissible because of what was performed before Yom Tov. Similarly, the Maharal explains that a person who correctly performed mitzvos beyond the Messianic Era when there was a yetzer hara will be able to perform them in the Messianic Era when there won't be one. Since he performed mitzvos when he had to fight the yetzer hara, he will be allowed to perform mitzvos even when there is no yetzer hara to fight.

To what end? All the reward for performing mitzvos is from overcoming the yetzer hara who tried to interfere with doing them. No yetzer hara, no resistance. No resistance, no reward, right?

Wrong, says the Maharal. Part of the reward for properly performing mitzvos while we have a yetzer hara is the opportunity to perform them when we will no longer have one—as if we still do. Just as mastering fear of God makes the other 612 mitzvos easier to perform, but does not reduce the reward for doing them, likewise properly performing mitzvos in this world gives us the reward of Messianic mitzvos without any loss of benefit.

This is the deeper meaning of, "The reward of a mitzvah is a mitzvah" (Pirkei Avos 4:2). The reward of a mitzvah performed in this yetzer hara-oriented world is the opportunity to perform a mitzvah in the yetzer hara-less world, and continue to receive reward for it. The interest accrued from the proper use of free will in this world pays dividends long after free will becomes a concept of the past.

According to the Talmud, this is true not just of the Messianic Era, but even into Olam HaBa—the World-to-Come. This is what God will tell the gentiles at that time when they complain about their

lack of mitzvos in this world. "Mitzvos still exist," He will tell them, "but only for the person who performed them in the previous world and developed the proper relationship to them. Only the person who prepared on 'Erev Shabbos' can eat on 'Shabbos.' Your complaint," He will prove to them, "is far too little, and far too late."

Knowing this, one is now ready to better appreciate this week's parsha, and the holiday of Succos that follows.