

PUNISHMENT: HIDDEN TREASURE?

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

It seems fair to say that, while at times we may hope to "get away" with our errors and shortcomings, thereby avoiding the admonition of the Almighty, the sincere Jew certainly doesn't expect to be rewarded for sin. Only the most misguided soul could possibly expect to "do as Zimri did, and expect the reward of Pinchas (see Bamidbar chapter 25; Sotah 22b)." Indeed, the Talmud in many instances goes out of its way to ensure that we do not inadvertently cause "the sinner to profit through his sin."

(Tangentially, as a teacher, it amazes me how poor a job we have done at instilling in our youth this most basic and elementary concept. If we fail, through our overindulgence and fear of overfocusing on achievement, to (gently) educate today's youth that diligence and excellence will be duly recognised and rewarded, and that indolence and half-hearted work are unacceptable, how can we expect to stem the rising tide of ignorance, laziness and am-aratzus that so plagues our generation?)

In light of this, let us examine a seemingly bizarre comment of Rashi in this week's parsha that "cries out" for an explanation. We know that, in the view of Chazal, our Sages, Negaim (the various blemishes dealt with in this week's Torah reading) are not so much a physical malady as a spiritual manifestation of one's sin. As the Rambam (Hilchos Tu'mas Tzaraas 16:10) expresses it, "[Tzaraas] is not a natural occurrence, but rather a wondrous sign in Israel in order to alert the Jews to the sin of lashon ha-ra (gossip and slanderous speech). One who speaks lashon ha-ra - the walls of his home would become afflicted. If he repented, fine. If he continued to sin, his clothing would be afflicted... Until the tzaraas would afflict his very body." Rashi, however, while clearly in agreement with this concept, mentions that there was a very positive flipside to tzaraas:

The affliction of tzaraas was a good tiding for the Jews. The Emorites [who had inhabited Canaan before the Jews] had hidden golden treasures in the walls of their houses during the forty years that Israel was in the desert. Through the affliction, one would be forced to break down one's walls, whereupon he would find the treasure! [14:34]

Of all the ways that the Almighty could have chosen to bring to our attention to the treasures hidden in our walls, why did He do so through an affliction which is clearly the result of our sin?

The Radvaz (Rabbi David ben Shlomo ibn Avi Zimra zt"l, 5239- 5333/1479-1573), in his explanation of the two Tochachos (Admonitions) of the Torah (see parshas Bechukosai and parshas Ki Savo), notes that two distinct types of punishment emerge. The Tochacha of Ki Savo continually expresses the punishments and calamities which will befall the Jews if they fail to heed Hashem's word as,

"Hashem will do this... Hashem will do that..." Clearly, we are being guided by Hashem, gently or not-so-gently, back to the path from which we have strayed. Conversely, the overriding theme of parshas Bechuksai is one of abandonment, "If you abandon Me, and treat My Torah casually, I too will treat you casually, and I will give you over into the hands of your enemies..."

There is, perhaps, only one thing worse for a child than being punished by a parent; being thrown out of the house. Punishment, when not abused, actually says: I love you and I care about you, and it bothers me that you are going in the wrong direction. A child might not always have the insight to fully understand this, but the message is there. Sending a child away says: I no longer have any interest in you; I have ceased to feel for you and no longer want you in my life.

[In desperation, a mother once called her husband up from the basement to "put those rowdy kids to sleep." After warning them what would befall the next child to leave his bed, all was quiet. Soon after, he heard: "Taaa... " "What?" "I'm thirsty. Can you bring me a drink of water?" "No, you had your chance. Lights out." Five minutes later: "Taaaaa... " "WHAT?" "I'm THIRSTY. Can I have a drink of water?!" "I told you NO! If you ask again, I'll have to potch (hit) you!" Five minutes later: "Taaaaaaa... " "WHAT??!!" "When you come in to potch me, can you bring me a drink of water?"]

This, explains the Radvaz, is why the Tochacha of Bechukosai concludes with words of consolation ("I will remember the covenant I made with Yaakov..." [Vayikra 26:42]), while Ki Savo does not. The Tochacha of Ki Savo requires no consolation. It is the greatest act of love and kindness that Hashem promises He will not let us stray too far from Him; that if need be, He will be there to remind us of our commitments and point out our shortcomings. The abandonment of Bechukosai, on the other hand, is so devastating and overwhelming, that it had to conclude with words of consolation.

This, says the Sha'arei Orah (volume 2, parshas Metzora), gives us a whole new perspective on punishment, and our reaction to it. G-d does not punish us as an act of revenge and anger; to the contrary, out of His great love for us, He punishes us to bring to our attention our erroneous ways, thereby steering us gently back to the path of the righteous. Perhaps the expression "punishment" is not even the right term, it's more like a gentle (or sometimes not-so-gentle) tap on the shoulder, reminding us where we are, and where we should be. If we have the insight and prudence to treat it as such, and, instead of responding with indignation as one punished is prone to do, we react by considering what indeed Hashem is saying, and what we can do to change, then we have not really been punished at all! We rejoice at having been aroused to teshuva (repentance), and are thankful for the opportunity for another chance.

If this is indeed how we react, then it is completely appropriate to reward us for having done so. "There is no man," says the Navi (Koheles/Ecclesiastes 7:20), "who is so righteous as to only do good and never sin." We all, at times, need a gentle potch on the hand. If we take that potch, and use it to awaken ourselves to teshuva and self-scrutiny, Hashem rewards us.

This is why, he explains, it is only at the first stage of tzaraas that we find the affliction leading to a

reward. If one pays attention to the Heavenly tap, and reacts accordingly, then he deserves to be duly rewarded. If, however, he continues to sin, then he obviously has failed to heed Hashem's message. The next stages of punishment, therefore, bring with them no reward; Hashem is forcing the sinner back, against his will.

Perhaps, then, the material treasures of gold found in the walls are symbolic of the hidden spiritual treasures that await those who have the insight and consideration to listen to the hidden messages of life; constant guidance and closeness to Hashem.

Have a good Shabbos.

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