

REWARD AND PUNISHMENT

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

If you will not change from what I do, because of these occurrences, but continue to walk contrary to Me, then I will also walk contrary to you, and will punish you another seven times for your mistakes.
(Vayikra 26:23-24)

Once again, we have arrived at the parshah of reward and punishment. The only thing is, though, as the Talmud states, there is no reward in this world for mitzvos performed (Kiddushin 39b). If so, why then does the Torah speak as if there is, promising worldly rewards for loyalty to Torah, and punishing results for straying from the path of Torah? To answer this question, there is an idea that I heard last week in the name of Rav Moshe Shapiro, shlita, told over at his Thursday night shiur, in Jerusalem, in advance of Pesach Sheni. He was explaining why it is that Pesach Sheni falls each year on the day of Chesed Sh'b'Hod, the Middas HaYom of Day 29, in the Omer Count.

Rabbi Shapiro explained that the trait of Hod, like the word modeh, to which it is related, means agreement, or admission. However, usually it refers to our agreement of God, to our admission to Him, and praise of all that He does for us. Rather, explained Rabbi Shapiro, it actually refers to God's admission to us, as occurred in the Torah with respect to Pesach Sheni:

"There were people who were ritually unclean from a dead body, which prevented them from performing the Pesach-Offering on that day. They came before Moshe and before Aharon on that day and complained, "We are unclean from a dead body. Why should this prevent us from offering to God in its appointed season with the rest of the Jewish people? Moshe answered them, "Wait, and I will see what God has to say concerning you." God told Moses, "Tell the Children of Israel that, if any person throughout the generations will be ritually unclean because of a dead body, or will be far way, he can still bring a Pesach-Offering to God." (Bamidbar 9:6-10)"

In other words, God told Moshe Rabbeinu, the people had a valid complaint, and Heaven was prepared to accommodate them, and others with the same problem throughout the generations. Hence, the laws of Pesach Sheni, a sign that Divine admission, and a chesed to be sure, and therefore, explained Rabbi Shapiro, it falls on Chesed Sh'b'Hod — the kindness of the admission, so-to-speak.

Based upon this explanation of hod, we can answer another question to do with the holiday of hod and hodayah, of admission and praise, the holiday of Chanukah. The question: Why was the military victory not enough to establish the holiday of Chanukah? Why, as the Talmud explains, did the

people of that time not feel the need to establish a new holiday until after the miracle of the Menorah occurred, when the oil burned for seven extra days (Shabbos 21b)?

The answer is that, before we can establish a new holiday, like Purim or Chanukah, we have to know that Heaven agrees with us. That's the *hod* aspect of Chanukah. Fine. However, the question is, why wasn't the military victory enough to act as a Heavenly approbation, sufficient enough to sanction a new rabbinical holiday?

Because, it says:

"One who trusts in God will be surrounded by kindness" (Tehillim 32:10); even an evil person who trusts in God will be surrounded by kindness.

(Midrash Tehillim 32:10). It further says: "Many are the agonies of the Wicked" (Tehillim Ibid.) ... because they do not place their trust in The Holy One, Blessed is He. (Midrash Tehillim Ibid.). The Ramban says something similar: This is why it says, "Trust in God and do good" (Tehillim 37:3), and it does not say "Do good and trust in God." Rather, [from this we learn that] trust in God does not depend upon good deeds at all, but rather one should trust in God whether he is righteous or evil. It concludes, however, with "do good" because if you do not [do teshuvah from past sins] then they will exact payment from you nevertheless. The Holy One, Blessed is He, is very patient, and will find the time to take payment from you (Sefer Emunah v'Bitachon, Ch. 1). (Sha'arei Leshem, p. 114)

Hence, we see, that the fact that a great miracle has happened for someone does not necessarily mean that God agrees with his general behavior and lifestyle. Rather, it may just mean that the person had the appropriate amount of trust in God at the right moment, enough to cause a miraculous salvation and get him out of his tough spot.

However, as the Ramban points out, once his troubles are over, the clock starts ticking again, as God anxiously waits for him to do teshuvah. Should the person fail to do the appropriate teshuvah for past sins in time, in spite of the miraculous salvation he enjoyed as a result of his trust in God, Heaven still lowers the Divine boom on him for those past sins.

That is why the military victory was not enough to warrant the establishment of a new rabbinical holiday. Their remarkable success on the battlefield did not necessarily mean that God agreed with the level of spirituality of those who experienced it. Rather, they had thought to themselves, it might have only been in the merit of their bitachon, their trust in God at the time, that they overcame an enemy far larger and more powerful than they were.

However, had the miracle of the oil not occurred for them after they had returned to the defiled temple to reinstate it, the Chashmonaim could have simply used whatever impure oil they had found in the meantime. That's the law. And, in eight more days, when they would have produced new pure oil, they would have then resumed the usage of pure oil. Knowing the Chashmonaim, they would have been grateful to God just for all of that. Instead, God insisted on performing the "extra"

miracle of the oil burning seven extra days, miraculously. It's as if God went out of His way, so-to-speak, to show the heroes of that time just how much their self-sacrifice had made an impression on Heaven, and to show them that God was on the same page as they were, because they had put themselves on the same page as God. The miracle of the oil was the Divine stamp of approval, the sign that Heaven was modeh to the Chashmonaim, indicating that they had Divine approval to establish a new holiday called Chanukah.

Though Eisav may want success for success's sake, Ya'akov lives for Divine approval. It is the ultimate compliment, the ultimate validation of one's existence when Divine Providence does something "extra" that seems to say, "Hey, good going. We like what you're doing, and want you to know it." We are hardwired to feel meaningful when we experience Heaven's approval of what we do, and to feel empty when the opposite occurs:

"After some time, Kayin brought a food offering to God from the fruit of the land. Hevel also brought [an offering], but from the firstborn of his sheep and of their milk. God favored Hevel and his meal-offering, but not Kayin and his meal-offering. Kayin became very angry and dejected. God said to Kayin, "Why are you angry, and why are you dejected? If you did the right thing would I not accept it?" (Bereishis 4:3-7)"

Last week, a midrash was mentioned regarding the death of Shaul HaMelech and his sons while in battle. However, there is another midrash regarding that fateful battle that killed the first king of Israel, and his valiant heirs to the throne.

The Midrash states that, when Shaul HeMelech went to battle that day, God called together His Heavenly Court and said:

"Come, take a look at what I have created ..." God told them, since the angels had voted against the creation of man.

"This man knows," God explained to the Heavenly Hosts, "that today he will die in battle ..."

He knew this because, as it says in the Book of Shmuel, Shaul had consulted the dead, the soul of Shmuel HaNavi, before that day, and the dead prophet had told the worried king of his impending death in battle.

"And yet," God says with pride, so-to-speak, "he goes out into battle as if he has a chance to win! And, not only this, but he takes his own sons with him, though he knows that they will die in battle as well this day! This man alone justifies the creation of man!"

It's the ultimate compliment. For, though it is nice to receive compliments from one's fellow man, Divine approval is the highest form of compliment one can receive, and the true source of self-worth. When people give compliments, it doesn't necessarily mean that what we are doing is meaningful to Creation. It may just mean that our actions are meaningful to the person giving the compliment, which can be contrary to the purpose of Creation.

Hence, the mishnah teaches:

"Rebi said: What is the proper path a person should choose for himself? Whatever brings glory to himself [before God], and grants him glory before others. Be careful with a minor mitzvah (commandment) as with a major one, for you do not know the reward for the mitzvos." (Pirkei Avos 2:1)

Before something can bring a person glory from other people, it has to first bring him glory before God; only then can the compliments from people have any real meaning. Indeed, they can even be taken as Divine compliments coming through the mouths of human beings, another way of God confirming that we're on the same page as He is.

Which brings us to this week's parshah. Clearly, as the Talmud states, the Torah is not discussing the reward that God plans for those who performed his mitzvos, or the punishment to be meted out for having strayed from Torah. Rather, God is telling us that success in this world, for the Jew who keeps Torah, is a Divine sign of approval; it is Heaven being modeh to our actions.

The negative consequences, likewise, for straying from Torah, are Heaven's way of expressing its disapproval. As the Talmud says, even a little bit of suffering should be enough to make a person consider his actions and look for something to rectify (Brochos 5a). Otherwise, he is going to get more of the same, until he wakes up.

Unless, that is, he does not want to know what Heaven is thinking. Bad move. For, once a person deals with Heaven on that level, measure-for-measure, Heaven deals with him on the same level, and that makes it next to impossible to rectify anything. Having broken the connection between himself and Heaven, the line of Divine communication no longer functions for him, setting him spiritually adrift:

"If you will not change from what I do, because of these occurrences, but continue to walk contrary to Me, then I will also walk contrary to you, and will punish you another seven times for your mistakes". (Vayikra 26:23-24)

We all know how nice it can be when another person makes a positive comment about what we do. However, there is nothing better, nothing more meaningful, nothing more validating than a compliment from Heaven, and it is what we are supposed to spend our lives pursuing. Chazak!

Text

Copyright © by [Rabbi Pinchas Winston](#) and Project Genesis, Inc.

Rabbi Winston has authored many books on Jewish philosophy (Hashkofa). If you enjoy Rabbi Winston's Perceptions on the Parsha, you may enjoy his books. Visit Rabbi Winston's [online book store](#) for more details! www.thirtysix.org