

DO YOU BELIEVE IN THE WORLD-TO-COME?

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

Your life will be in doubt; you will dread day and night, and have no belief in your life. (Devarim 28:66)

In Hebrew, it is called Olam HaBah, which translates, in English, into The World-to-Come. It is also called Eternity, and belief in its existence is fundamental to Jewish belief, as listed in the 13 Principles of Faith. As far as Judaism is concerned, this world is merely just a corridor to get there:

This world is like a corridor before the World-to-Come. Rectify yourself in the corridor in order to be able to enter the Banquet Hall. (Pirkei Avos 4:16)

The World-to-Come is mentioned many times in the Oral Law, but there is no direct reference to it in the Written Law. Strange as this may seem, it is because, as Kabbalah explains, the Jewish people built the golden calf and forced Moshe Rabbeinu to break the first set of tablets. As a result, they could only receive a lesser level of Torah designed specifically to allow people to properly function in this world, so that they can get to the next one.

The Maharal explains that since the entire Written Torah is a direct prophecy from God to Moshe Rabbeinu, it could only include that about which Moshe Rabbeinu could have a prophecy. However, with respect to the World-to-Come, the Talmud states:

All the prophets foretold only regarding Yemos HaMoshiach. However, regarding the World-to-Come, "No eye has seen, God, except for Yours" (Yeshayahu 64:3). (Brochos 34b)

Not even Moshe Rabbeinu's; not even his mind's eye. Nevertheless, the Talmud does attempt to give a sense of what the World-to-Come will like:

In the future world there is no eating, nor drinking, nor propagation, nor business, nor jealousy, nor hatred, nor competition, but the righteous sit with their crowns on their heads feasting on the brightness of the Divine Presence. (Brochos 17a)

Granted, this is only appealing to someone who loves nothing better than to be close to God. As one secular person once told me, "If there's no basketball, I'm not going." Well, there is no basketball in Olam HaBah (badminton is the game of choice for angels), and whether he goes or not may be out of his control if he doesn't do teshuvah in advance of standing before the Heavenly Tribunal.

Of course, this person is making the classic mistake that many have made throughout the millennia. He is simply assuming that his current version of pleasure is the ultimate one, and that he will always feel the same way about physical pleasure and spiritual pleasure, yearning for the latter while

forsaking the latter. Hence, the rabbis warned:

One hour of bliss in the World-to-Come is better than the entire life of this world. (Pirkei Avos 4:22)

However, that is like telling a six year old that one day he's going to enjoy eating vegetables more than he does eating candy. He won't believe you for a second, because he's had both already, and candy is a much more blissful experience. It doesn't matter to him now that he sees all the adults around him reaching for the veggies instead of the sweeties; the why is still outside of his personal experience.

This is why even those of us who wholeheartedly believe in the World-to-Come still do things in this world that detract from our portion in Eternity. Personally, I find, I can get so caught up in the moment sometimes that I can forget, temporarily, about Olam HaBah and that this world is only a corridor to get there. Like at a New York wedding, at which it is easy to forget that the sumptuous smorgasbord outside the main hall is only a prelude to the meal inside the banquet room, it is easy to forget that many of the billions of wonderful physical pleasures available in this world can be worth sacrificing, or at least limiting, for the sake of increasing one's portion in the World-to-Come.

But doesn't the mishnah say that every Jew already have a portion in the World-to-Come (Sanhedrin 90a)? Yes, but it also mentions that a person can lose his portion in the World-to-Come as well, as it says in the Torah:

Any person who will not be afflicted on that day, he shall be cut off from his people. Whoever does any manner of work on that day, I will destroy that soul from among his people. (Vayikra 23:29-30)

Does this mean that some people will not go to the World-to-Come in the end? Not according to this:

The truth is, all punishments and curses mentioned in Toras Kohanim and in the Mishnah Torah are only revelations as they appear to us now. However, regarding their essence and hidden meaning, it says in the Zohar Chadash, Parashas Ki Savo, in the name of Eliyahu, may he be remembered for good: All the promises and consolations for the Jewish people are written in these curses, as they say on the verse, "Your life will be in doubt; you will dread day and night, and have no belief in your life," hints to the end of the redemption. (Hakdamos u'Sha'arim, Sha'ar 6, Perek 9)

In other words, though it seems from the Torah and the Mishnah that it is possible for someone to get cut off from the Jewish people forever, that's just the way it seems to us now. As the Malbim explains, even the worst threats of the Torah only last for a limited time, after every Jew goes to the World-to-Come. The Talmud also says this in the name of the Dorshei Reshumos.

So what then does the mishnah mean when it says that some people can lose their portion in the World-to-Come? The Leshem explains this based upon the Rekanti, who addressed the same issue and explained that the contradiction exists only because people assumed that "going to the World-to-Come" and "have a portion in the World-to-Come" to be the same thing. They are not. What is the

difference? The difference is very like the difference between someone who owns and lives in a house, and someone who lives in the street.

In the case of the former, he is the master of his own dwelling, and he possesses the means to take care of himself. The latter has no dwelling of his own, and he is dependent upon whatever homeowners share with him. Likewise, a person with a portion in the World-to-Come has his own dwelling filled with light of God that is unique to him, over which he has control. However, people who lost their portions in the World-to-Come do go there anyhow, but they will not have a "storehouse" of Divine light of their own. They will only enjoy the light that flows to them from those who do have a portion in the World-to-Come. If that is the case, who wouldn't then regret having lost their portion in the World-to-Come, or even just having earned a lesser one?

But then again, try and tell a child that if he saves his money now and doesn't "waste" it on silly things like having fun, he'll have money for when he gets married for a deposit on a house, chances are your words will go in one ear and out the other without registering anywhere in-between. Au contraire, should a child make such a sacrifice people will question his mental well-being.

As I sat at a eulogy for Rabbi Yosef Shalom Elyashiv, zt"l, recently, and listened to how he lived out his days ever since he was young, I was overwhelmed by how ready the late Gadol HaDor was for Olam HaBah, and how little he had, if anything at all, to worry about when getting to Heaven. The same thing is true after reading the book about Rabbi Noson Tzvi Finkel, zt"l, who also died recently, and I am certainly jealous, in a good kind of way.

Among the billions of differences between people like me and gadolim like them, a fundamental one is that they believe in the World-to-Come, not just on an intellectual level, but on an emotional one as well. Their lives were completely spiritual, and a sacrifice for them was giving up their own learning time to help others who needed, in other words, between one mitzvah and another. Non-mitzvos were never part of the calculation of how they spent their time and energy.

However, as much as I'd like to believe my life is one long ongoing mitzvah, I have a long way to go before that is true. A lot of times when I make a sacrifice for a mitzvah, it is at the cost of a non-mitzvah, and I feel like a hero for making it. In the meantime, the angels looking on cast glances at each other and ask, "He was actually considering that other thing? Doesn't he believe in the World-to-Come?"

Of course I do, well, at least intellectually. Emotionally, I still often get drawn in by the smorgasbord of physical pleasures of this world, in a kosher way of course. "But if it's kosher, then what's the issue?" a person why ask at this point. The answer to that question can best be summed up by the following statement in the Talmud:

Rava, and some say, Rav Chisda, said: "If a person is suffering, he should examine his conduct, as it says, 'Let us search and check our ways, and return to the God' (Eichah 3:40). If he examines and finds nothing [objectionable], let him attribute it to the neglect of the study of the Torah, as it says,

'Happy is the man whom You chastise O God, and teach out of Your law' (Tehillim 94:12)." (Brochos 5a)

Who can look at their deeds and find them perfectly in consonance with the Divine will? And, even if you can, can you also say that you learned Torah every moment you were able to, and didn't waste an opportunity to do so? Rabbi Elyashiv and Rabbi Finkel, and all the others like them, spent their entire lives in such a way so that they could answer these questions positively. So should we. Not necessarily on the level they did, but on the level that suits us, based upon who we are, what we have, and how we live.

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