

# SOLDIERS OR DO-GOODERS?

*by Rabbi Aron Tendler*

What defines good and evil? What is reward and punishment? How do we understand blessings and curses?

At the core of these questions is humanity's search for purpose and direction. Good and evil are the rules that frame and direct our behavior. Reward and punishment provide the incentives and deterrents to do good or not do evil. Blessings and curses express our belief in the inevitability of reward and punishment. Good will be rewarded and evil will be punished.

Rav Yoseph Albo (Sefer Haikarim) in defining the structure of all viable religions concluded that there are three basic principles of faith that all religions have in common. A) Belief in the existence of G-d. B) Belief that G-d revealed His purpose for creating the universe by giving rules to His free-willed humans. C) Belief that G-d will reward those who follow His rules and punish those who do not.

Rav Albo's three principles of faith are sequentially logical. Belief in a G-d is the belief that the universe was created for a reason. Otherwise, it is much less imposing on us to believe that there is no G-d. If there is a G-d there must be rules. If there is no G-d, we can make our own rules.

To believe that there is a G-d but that He did not give any rules is to assume that G-d does not care about what He created. As the only free-willed creatures in existence, we have the ability to maintain or destroy the world. Animals can only do that which G-d has hard-wired or trained them to do. Therefore, if G-d cared what happened to His world He would have given us instructions and limitations. If He did not give rules and set limits it would mean that He did not care what happened to the world that He created. If He did not care why would He have created the world? Creating something that is otherwise meaningless to the Creator contradicts our understanding of G-d.

An intelligent G-d created the world with a goal in mind. He cares about His creations and cares whether we are advancing His goals or not advancing His goals. Therefore, at some point in history He must have revealed to us how we can participate in advancing His goals for humanity and the universe. At some point He must have given us a set of rules and regulations. If we follow His rules we will advance G-d's goals. If we do not follow His rules we interfere with His goals.

If we believe in an intelligent and purposeful G-d Who gave us rules that direct our behavior, it only makes sense to believe that He cares whether we do or do not do what He wants. Reward or punishment express G-d's caring.

If we accept Rav Albo's framework for defining religion, we can conclude that the reason G-d created the free-willed human was to challenge him to either do or not do the will of G-d, to either participate or interfere with His goal for the universe. Therefore, our purpose in being created and the focus of our existence should be to advance His goals and do G-d's will.

To do G-d's will demands that we acknowledge His dominion. Therefore, G-d's goal is for all of humanity to recognize His dominion. As the Torah said in Parshas V'eschanan, "and the nations of the land will see that G-d's name is upon you." Therefore, reward and punishment will be in proportion to the degree of our recognition of G-d's dominion and our adherence to G-d's wishes.

The definition of good and bad is as follows. Any thought or act that advances G-d's goal is good. Any thought or act that does not advance G-d's goal is bad. So long as we follow His rules in the manner that G-d expects we are doing good. The moment we deviate from His rules we are doing bad.

The greatest reward should be the greatest good. The greatest good is to do the will of G-d. Therefore, reward must be the opportunity to do the will of G-d.

The worst punishment should be the absence of the greatest reward. Therefore, punishment must be the inability or hindrance in doing the will of G-d.

Blessings are our hopes and wishes that we, or others, will understand the true meaning of good, have the opportunity to do the will of G-d, and in the end receive the greatest reward.

Curses are those forces that blind us, or others, from seeing the good in serving G-d, interfere with our ability to do the will of G-d, and in the end are their own greatest punishment.

We can now understand the first three verses of this week's Parsha. The first verse stated that Moshe was going to present us with the choice between Blessings and Curses. We can choose to be blessed, or we can choose to be cursed. The second verse explained what were the Blessings. "that you should hearken to G-d's commandments that I (Moshe) am commanding you today." The third verse explained what were the curses. "if you do not hearken to the commandments of G-d and stray from G-d's commandments that I commanding you today."

At first glance we would wonder what were the blessings and curses that Moshe had referred to. However, if we accept our definition of good and bad, reward and punishment, blessings and curses, the Parsha is saying exactly the same thing. The greatest blessing is to be able to "hearken to G-d's Mitzvos." The greatest curse is to not "hearken to G-d's commandments."

What is the status of the "good deed" that is not in response to a commandment? It makes sense that there cannot be a "Mitzvah-commandment" without a "Mitzaveh-commander." However, is there the possibility of a good deed that is deserving of G-d's reward even though it is not a "commandment?"

The Rambam, Ramban, Chovos Halevavos, and other commentaries conclude that there is no reward for a good deed that is not a Mitzvah. There are others who disagree, but following our line of reasoning we can understand why only "Mitzvos" are deserving of reward and not "good deeds."

Good is listening to G-d and advancing His goal. Reward is the opportunity to do more of the same. G-d's goal is for everyone to recognize His dominion. The Mitzvos we do are individual proclamations of G-d's dominion, and the reward we receive is the opportunity to do more of the same. Why should someone who does a "good deed" but does not believe in a Commander be rewarded with more opportunities for doing the same? His good deed did not proclaim G-d's dominion; rather, it proclaimed his individual perspective of good and evil, right and wrong. Such an act does not advance G-d's goal for humanity to recognize His dominion. Therefore, it is not deserving of reward.

Furthermore, what motivates a person to do "Mitzvos" or "good deeds?" The religious personality, Jewish or non-Jewish, does Mitzvos for two reasons. A) He believes that G-d commanded him to do so. B) He feels that it is the right thing to do.

The residentially challenged individual (homeless) who begs a handout evokes our sense of caring and compassion. The money we give is therefore a proclamation of G-d's dominion as well as a statement of personal values.

The atheistic personality on the other hand, Jewish or non-Jewish, does "good deeds" for only one reason. He feels that it is the right thing to do. Caring and compassion motivate him as well; however, his "good deed" only proclaims his personal values.

First of all, why should we trust any person's feelings and sense of right and wrong? As Avraham said to Avimelech, "I do not trust your morality or ethics because they are not motivated by "Yiras Elokim" - The acknowledgment of G-d's dominion. What is good today is evil tomorrow!"

Secondly, our understanding of reward is as a consequence for a free willed decision to serve G-d, advance His goals, and proclaim His dominion. Although all of nature do G-d's will and proclaim His dominion, they do not receive reward because they are not free willed. The fact that they listen to G-d's commands is due to hard wiring or repetitive training, not free will.

The atheist who does good deeds does so because he "feels" emotionally or intellectually that it is the right thing to do. His feelings and thoughts are the product of his natural tendencies, environment, and training. However, they are not the outcome of a free-willed decision to do the will of G-d, regardless of what the person may feel or think. Therefore, his "good deeds" are no more deserving of reward than any other non-free willed creation is deserving of reward.

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