

Parshas Bechukosai

Reward vs. Idealism

This week’s parsha begins by recounting the physical reward that the Jewish people will receive when they fulfill the mitzvos. The present Sicha discusses the importance of reward in general and the emphasis of physical reward in particular.

This week’s *parsha* begins with an account of the blessings that the Jewish people merit when they follow G-d’s statutes. The Torah states G-d’s assurance of the reward that man will receive for doing the *mitzvos*:

Text 1

If you follow My statutes and observe My commandments and perform them, I will give your rains in their time, the Land will yield its produce, and the tree of the field will give forth its fruit.

Vayikra 26:3-4

manner that it did in the time of Adam...on the day it was planted it produced fruit. From whence do we know that in the future the tree will be eaten? We learn it from [the verse⁴,] “fruit trees.” [Why does the verse use these words?] Does the verse not already say, “producing fruit?” If so, the words “fruit trees” are superfluous. Rather, [these words teach] that just as the fruit was to be eaten, so too the wood was to be eaten. From whence [do we know] that in the future, even non-fruit-bearing trees will produce fruit? We learn it [from the verse⁵,] “And the tree of the field will give forth its fruit.”

Toras Cohanim, Vayikra 26:4

On this verse the Medrash comments:

Text 2

Not like it does now, rather like it did in the time of Adam. And from whence [do we know] that in the future the land will be planted and make produce on the same day? We learn it from [the verse¹,] “He made a memorial for His wonders.” So too it states², “Let the earth sprout vegetation.” This teaches that on the day it was planted, on that day it would produce fruit. “And the tree of the field will give forth its fruit³,” not in the manner that it does now, rather in the

The Medrash recounts the radical change in the way things will grow in the messianic era. Fruit will sprout from trees the day they are planted, the wood itself will be edible and all trees will bear fruit.

The miraculous physical world which will exist in the times of Moshiach is expressed in the Talmud as well.

Text 3

There will be a time when the Land of Israel will produce baked cakes of the purest quality and

¹ Tehillim 111:4.

² Bereishis 1:11.

³ Vayikra 26:4.

⁴ Bereishis 1:11.

⁵ Vayikra 26:4.

silk garments...there will be a time when wheat will rise as high as a palm-tree and will grow on the top of the mountains...there will be a time when a grain of wheat will be as large as the two kidneys of a big bull.

Talmud, Kesuvos 111b

This description of the physical abundance during the messianic era must be understood. For, when Maimonides describes the era of Moshiach, he mitigates the role of the corporeal and stresses that the time of Moshiach is about spiritual fulfillment:

Text 4

In that era, there will be neither famine nor war, envy or competition, for good will flow in abundance and all the delights will be as dust. The occupation of the entire world will be solely to know G-d.

Therefore, the Jews will be great sages and know the hidden matters, grasping the knowledge of their Creator according to the full extent of human potential, as the verse⁶ states: "The world will be filled with the knowledge of G-d as the waters cover the ocean bed."

Rambam, Laws of Kings 12:5

The time of Moshiach is one during which "the world will be filled with the knowledge of G-d as the waters cover the ocean bed," not physical bliss. It is self-understood that when mankind will be in a state where their focus is on G-dly

⁶ Yeshaya 11:9.

⁷ While Rambam does indeed state that "all the delights will be as dust," the meaning of the statement is that the material abundance will be

pursuits, there won't be any importance given to physical abundance⁷.

Although the idea that "good will flow in abundance," is advantageous, in that such a scenario will alleviate the struggle for physical pursuits and facilitate a situation where the Jewish people will be "free to immerse themselves in Torah study and wisdom without any pressures or disturbances from material pursuits⁸,"—it is not though, an end unto itself.

Why then, does the Talmud explain at such great length the tremendous physical abundance that will be found during the time of Moshiach, when it merely serves a greater purpose?

Our parsha

Similar to the question posed above concerning the era of Moshiach, the commentators ask concerning our *parsha*, which discusses the physical rewards for doing the *mitzvos*:

Why does the Torah discuss the physical blessings at such great length, if the *spiritual* benefits of the *mitzvos* are their true reward? Instead of the Torah recounting the spiritual benefits of the *mitzvos*, it tells of the corporeal ones.

The above commentators answer this question in the following way⁹:

Text 5

Those benefits are not the ultimate reward for the *mitzvos*...the good that is mentioned here in this *parsha* are rather things that remove obstacles. G-d's intent is to say, that if you guard My *mitzvos*, I will remove from you all obstacles

given the same consideration as dust, since no attention will be given to them.

⁸ Rambam, Laws of Kings 12:4.

⁹ Based on Rambam, Laws of Teshuvah 9:1.

such as war, sickness, famine and toil, so that you will be able to serve G-d with no restriction. The main reward of the World to Come is not mentioned here in order that a person serve G-d for His Name, and not for reward or fear of punishment.

Klei Yakar, Vayikra 26:12

While the Klei Yakar's view is that this section discusses the *facilitator* for the ultimate reward and not the reward *itself*, according to many of the commentators, this *parsha* is indeed discussing the reward for the *mitzvos*. In their view, the Torah is not merely discussing the conditions which remove physical hindrances in one's service of G-d.

Idealistic service

In order to understand the reason that the Torah discusses the physical benefits for fulfilling G-d's commandments, we must first preface with the answer to another question:

Why does the Torah discuss reward *at all* (whether physical or spiritual), if the essence of serving G-d is to do so for no compensation whatsoever?

It is known, that the Mishna expresses the notion of performing *mitzvos* purely for the sake of serving the Almighty, and not for personal gain, as expressed in the following teaching:

Text 6

Antignos of Socho received the tradition from Shimon the Righteous. He would say: "Do not be as slaves who serve their master for the sake of reward. Rather, be as slaves who serve their master not for the sake of reward."

Pirkei Avos 1:3

If serving G-d for reward is frowned upon, then why does the Torah discuss any form of benefit for performing *mitzvos* at all?

The reward of *mitzvos*

The following is a statement that Rambam makes concerning serving G-d with no ulterior motive:

Text 7

One who serves [G-d] out of love, occupies himself in the Torah and the *mitzvos* and walks in the paths of wisdom for no ulterior motive: not because of fear that evil will occur, nor in order to acquire benefit. Rather, he does what is true because it is true, and ultimately, good will come because of it. This is a very high level, which is not merited by every wise man. It is the level of our Patriarch, Avraham, whom G-d described as, "he who loved Me," for his service was only motivated by love.

Rambam, Laws of Teshuva 10:2

While Rambam says that serving G-d with no ulterior motives is indeed the ultimate approach of G-dly service, he admits that such a tremendous manner of serving the Almighty is not attainable for every individual.

It is because serving G-d with no ulterior motive is such an extraordinary goal, that Rambam maintains in regard to the education of children, that one should begin by educating them to do *mitzvos* for personal gain until they mature to the point where they can begin doing a *mitzvah* for its own end.

Text 8

Therefore, when one teaches children...one should teach them to serve out of fear and in order to receive a reward. As their knowledge grows and their wisdom increases, this secret should be revealed to them [slowly,] bit by bit. They should become accustomed to this concept gradually until they grasp it and know it and begin serving [G-d] out of love.

Rambam, Laws of Teshuva 10:5

Likewise, it is due to the fact that the Torah speaks to the majority of the Jewish people¹⁰—which consists of a vast number of individuals who do not serve G-d for purely idealistic motives—that the reward for doing *mitzvos* is explicit in the Torah.

Just as the reason that reward in general is mentioned in the Torah is because there are those Jews who do not serve G-d in a purely idealistic fashion, so too it can be explained concerning the *type* of reward that is mentioned in the Torah.

Most Jews are at a level on which they do not necessarily long for spiritual compensation. As such, discussing spiritual recompense would not serve as a motivator to these individuals. Therefore, the Torah is specific in its mention of the physical rewards for the *mitzvos*, since concerning the physical, even someone uninspired by spirituality can appreciate its benefits; they will consequently be motivated to learn Torah and fulfill G-d's *mitzvos*.

In a similar vein, the physical rewards that the Talmud recounts concerning the time of Moshiach can be explained as well.

Even during the era of Moshiach, not every person will *immediately* be on a level where they appreciate spiritual reward or value serving G-d purely for its own sake. Then too, man will need to work in his service of G-d in order to reach a true appreciation for serving G-d with no ulterior motive.

It is therefore important that even concerning the time of Moshiach there be physical rewards to motivate people to serve G-d and this is the reason why the Talmud and Medrash are explicit concerning the physical rewards that will be during the messianic era.

A part of Torah

This explanation however, is a bit of a stretch. For, the *parsha* of Bechukosai and other *parshiyos* which discuss assurances of physical reward for the *mitzvos* were not *only* said to Jews that needed encouragement in their service of G-d, but even to those Jews who served G-d in an exalted manner.

According to the answer suggested above though—that Torah discusses physical reward to motivate those that are uninspired by spirituality—this section of the Torah would not be applicable to those that appreciate spiritual reward and obviously not to those that serve G-d for no reward at all.

While the above answer was based on the clause of Rambam in his Guide to the Perplexed, i.e., that Torah speaks to the majority of people rather than to the minority, this concept does not justify the explanation that the Torah's discussion of reward here is only to those who appreciate the physical.

The reason is as follows: Although Torah does indeed speak towards the majority, it is more plausible to explain the verse in a manner that is applicable to everyone—especially that

¹⁰ Morah Nevuchim 3:34.

everything in Torah must have some lesson for the minority.

What then, could possibly be the lesson in the Torah's description of the physical benefits for those that serve G-d for the spiritual reward or for no reward whatsoever?

An addition, it is also most reasonable for the *physical* rewards expressed in this verse to have application to those that appreciate spirituality or serve G-d for purely idealistic reasons, based on the explanation of the Medrash on the verse¹¹: "If you follow My statutes and observe My commandments and perform them."

On the words, "My statutes," Rashi comments¹²:

Text 9

I might think that this refers to the fulfillment of the commandments. However, when Scripture says, "and observe My commandments," the fulfillment of the commandments is [already] stated. So what is the meaning of "If you follow My statutes"? It means that you must toil in the study of Torah.

Rashi, Vayikra 26:3

The individual that this verse is discussing is not someone who merely performs *mitzvos* in a perfunctory manner (for the purpose of receiving reward), but a person who exerts effort and toils in the study of Torah.

This idea becomes even more pronounced according to the Chassidic explanation of the word "*bechukosai*" (My statutes) being related to the word "*chakika*," meaning engraving.

¹¹ Vayikra 26:3.

¹² Based on Toras Cohanim, Vayikra 26:2.

Text 10

It is known, that in the Written Torah there are two types of inscriptions. For, concerning the Tablets the verse states¹³, "and the inscription was G-d's inscription, engraved on the Tablets." This imparts that the writing was from the very Tablets, which [the letters] were engraved *from* them and *upon* them, and the letters were not a separate entity. However, the rest of the Written Torah is [comprised of] ink written on parchment, of which the letters are a separate entity, and not from the essential parchment.

Likutei Torah, Bechukosai 45a

When a person learns Torah in a manner of "*bechukosai*," which means engraving, the Torah learning becomes literally engraved upon the individual's very identity. His very identity becomes the Torah study that he learns and it is not merely superimposed on his person.

It is understood, that when an individual studies Torah in such a manner, his *mitzvos* as well are engraved on his very person.

It is safe to assume that by such a person who learns Torah in this manner, he does not care about anything else other than fulfilling Torah and *mitzvos*—physical rewards are meaningless.

If so, why does the verse specifically proclaim that the reward for learning Torah and doing *mitzvos* in such a manner ("*bechukosai*") is that he will receive physical rewards, when such a person has no desire for physical pleasures?!

True Life

The explanation of this can be understood through an appreciation of the way that a Jew

¹³ Shemos 32:16.

identifies with the Torah. Concerning the Torah, the verse states:

Text 11

For that is your life and the length of your days.

Devarim 30:20

The verse imparts that not only does Torah *cause* life in this world and in the World to Come, but that Torah is as well, the *true life* of every Jew.

Torah and a Jew are not two separate entities, it is his very being.

A person's physical make-up is comprised of three general distinct sections: the head, the body and the legs. The head is the seat of the higher senses of intellect, as well as sight, sound, etc. The body, which centers around the heart, is the seat of emotion. The legs, however, only contains the ability of movement which is the lowest of man's abilities.

While each separate location in the body has its *specific* functions, the general life force of the soul that enlivens the whole body is found in the entire individual equally.

This is because the life that is from the soul is the *essence* of the individual, and is therefore expressed in the *entirety* of the person. Likewise, the more that an idea relates to the person's essential identity, the wider the expression in the individual.

With this in mind, the following conclusion can be made: The litmus test to determine whether a certain trait comes from the individual's essence, is if the detail is not only expressed in the person's mind, heart or other expressions of the individual, but in his person as a whole.

By way of example: If a person contemplates something that brings him joy, the true expression that will demonstrate that the happiness is real, is when the person not only *thinks* about the joy or speaks about it, but it comes to physical expression through dancing with his feet. So too with other emotions of love, fear, pain, etc. They can be recognized as being authentic when they are expressed physically as well.

The same is true concerning the fact that Torah is the life and essence of every Jew. This is not communicated when the Torah only affects the individual's heart or mind, but when it affects him *physically* as well.

Were the reward for learning Torah only to have been spiritual, there would be no expression that Torah has become an individual's entire identity, as a spiritual reward would be commensurate and a natural expression of his learning Torah, which is a spiritual endeavor.

However, when a person is rewarded *physically* for his Torah study, it expresses that Torah study is not only an expression of one aspect of his identity, but that Torah is his *entire* identity and his life. Therefore, Torah study brings to an expression of physical goodness in this world.

The reason that Torah is the true life-force and identity of every individual is because Torah is one with G-d.

Text 12

The Torah and the Holy One, blessed be He, are one.

Tanya, Ch. 4¹⁴

¹⁴ Based on Zohar 2:60a.

Just as G-d is the true Existence, Who is the source of all that is good in existence, so too is Torah—which is one with Him—the source for all that is good spiritually or physically.

It is therefore *specifically* in physical reward where it is expressed that Torah is one with an individual's identity. Not only is physical reward not superfluous, but it is the ultimate expression that the Torah is intrinsic to a person's *entire* identity—including the physical.

The time of Moshiach

According to the above, the reason for the focus of physical rewards in the *parsha* as well as the time of Moshiach can be explained.

The difference between our times and the time of Moshiach is similar to the distinctions between letters which are expressed on paper or within stone.

The fact that in the time prior to the coming of Moshiach we must toil and wait until the fruits ripen, is due to the fact that this world is not a proper receptacle for G-dly expression. It is because the world is not a proper conduit for G-dly expression, that it takes time and effort until the physical land bears fruit.

When Moshiach will come however, this world will be one with G-d and permeated with the revelation of His presence. Therefore, no toil will be necessary and no time will pass for trees to bear fruit.

This is similar to a stone that is engraved through and through, where the stone and the letters are completely one.

Just as in the allegory of something which is engraved in a stone but not completely carved out through the material, the letters are not completely expressed in the stone, so too with the words of Torah. When one learns Torah in a

way that the letters are engraved, but not completely carved through its substance, there remains a certain aspect within the individual where the words of Torah are not expressed.

In the state which we are presently in, the world is at most like a stone that is not engraved completely through, where there is a part of the stone in which the letters are not expressed. It is for this reason that in this world, G-dliness does not fully permeate the physicality.

In the time of Moshiach though, G-dliness will permeate the world completely, like a stone carved through and through. As such, G-dliness will be revealed in the utmost way and expressed in the physical as well.

This will be revealed when Moshiach comes, as the verse says concerning the Tablets that the letters were "*charus* (engraved) on the Tablets¹⁵." On these words the Mishna explains,

Text 13

"And the Tablets are the work of G-d, and the writing is G-d's writing, engraved on the Tablets¹⁶." Read not "engraved," (*charus*) but "liberty" (*cheirus*)—for there is no free individual, except for he who occupies himself with the study of Torah.

Pirkei Avos 6:2

When one learns Torah in a way in which it is "engraved," they merit the ultimate freedom from all negativity, which will be found by the coming of Moshiach.

(Based on Likutei Sichos 37, Bechukosai, reworked by Rabbi Dovid Markel. To see other

¹⁵ Shemos 32:16.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

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