

PARASHAS BECHUKOSAI

Intrinsic Rewards

What do we really gain after the struggles of a lifetime? Even under the best of circumstances, life is but a bubbling brew of joy and grief, of success and failure, of hope and despair. We accumulate wealth and possessions, and we leave them all behind. So where are life's rewards? Are the brief experiences of pride and pleasure, the occasional highs, sufficient compensation for all the effort we invest in life?

Judaism believes they do not even come close. According to our Sages, this world is a "vestibule to the next." It is a world of illusion in which we have the opportunity to prepare for "the world of truth," the eternal world of the spirit, to gather merit which will last us for all eternity. True reward and punishment cannot be measured by material standards.

If so, ask the commentators, why doesn't the Torah tell us specifically about the world to come? For example, in this week's portion, we read about the rewards for fulfilling the *mitzvos* of the Torah and the consequences of failing to do so. What are the rewards? Bountiful crops, secure borders, prosperity. What are the consequences? A litany of horrendous calamities, pestilence and mayhem. There is no mention of the rewards and consequences in the next world, no hint of the eternal bliss that waits those who fulfill the commandments of the Torah. Why not?

Most people think of reward in terms of receiving something external to ourselves. We win a major contest, and we receive a new car. We turn in a criminal to the police, and we receive a check. But these rewards are basically inferior. Since they derive from external sources, they remain external to us. They become our possessions but remain separate from us. They do not improve who and what we are, just what we have.

Spiritual reward is of a completely different nature. When we are rewarded in the next world we will not be given an object or some other transferable entity which we will take into our possession to use as an external stimulus to pleasure. Spiritual reward transforms us from within. It makes us higher and more refined, more capable of coming close to the Almighty, and that in itself is the greatest reward.

"The reward for a *mitzvah*," the Sages say, "is the *mitzvah*." What does this mean? The sacred texts find a correlation between the word

mitzvah and the word *tzavsa*, which means connection. The performance of a *mitzvah*, they explain, connects you directly to the Almighty. The more *mitzvos* you do the more closely connected you become. This connection itself is the highest form of reward to which we could possibly aspire, and its achievement is entirely within our power. Conversely, anything we do to weaken this connection is its own greatest punishment.

The Torah, therefore, does not have to tell us about the rewards and consequences awaiting us in the next world. They are not external things Hashem promises to do. They are implicit in the word *mitzvah*, and they come to us of their own accord. But here the Torah is telling us that, in addition to the spiritual implications to the *mitzvos* themselves, we will also receive material rewards or punishment, a minor external stimulus to steer us in the right direction.

A professor in a medical school offered a reward the student who would score the highest mark on a test in an exceedingly difficult subject. The students were motivated by the challenge, and they studied very hard. Two weeks later, the test was administered. One student got a perfect score, and he was awarded the prize.

The next day, the professor presented him with a gift-wrapped package. The student thanked the principal profusely.

"Why are you thanking me so much?" asked the professor. "You haven't even unwrapped the package. How do you know you'll like it?"

"Oh, the package is insignificant," said the student. "Your challenge led me to learn much I might not have otherwise known. It has given me priceless insight that will improve my ability to help others for the rest of my life. Thank you."

In our own lives, material goals and rewards can easily distract us, and we may find that we are expending inordinate amounts of physical and emotional energy in that direction. But life is ephemeral, and those rewards will not accompany us when we are done. Only the rewards of the spirit enrich us in a meaningful and lasting way.