

Eikev - Shabbat Morning

We read a few minutes ago these words from the opening of our parasha:

וְהָיָה אִם עָקַב תִּשְׁמְעוּן אֶת הַמִּשְׁפָּטִים הָאֵלֶּה וְשָׁמַרְתֶּם וְעָשִׂיתֶם אֹתָם וְשָׁמַר יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיךָ לְךָ אֶת-הַבְּרִית
וְאֶת-הַחֶסֶד אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּע לְאַבְרָהָם:

וְאַהֲבֶיךָ וְיִבְרַכְךָ וְיִרְבֶּךָ וְיִבְרַכְךָ וְיִרְבֶּךָ וְיִבְרַכְךָ וְיִרְבֶּךָ וְיִבְרַכְךָ וְיִרְבֶּךָ וְיִבְרַכְךָ וְיִרְבֶּךָ
עַל הָאֲדָמָה אֲשֶׁר-נִשְׁבַּע לְאַבְרָהָם לְתַתּ לָךְ:

בְּרוּךְ תִּהְיֶה מְכֹל-הָעַמִּים לֹא-יְהִי בְּךָ עֵקֶר וְעֵקֶרָה וּבְבָהֶמְתֶּךָ:

וְהִסִּיר יְהוָה מִמֶּךָ כָּל-חֲלִי וְכָל-מַדּוּי מִצְרָיִם הַרְעִים אֲשֶׁר יָדַעְתָּ לֹא יִשִּׁימֶם בְּךָ וּנְתַנֶּם בְּכָל-שָׁנָיִךְ:

And if you do obey these rules and observe them carefully, your God יהוה will maintain faithfully for you the covenant made on oath with your fathers:

[God] will favor you and bless you and multiply you—blessing your issue from the womb and your produce from the soil, your new grain and wine and oil, the calving of your herd and the lambing of your flock, in the land sworn to your fathers to be assigned to you.

You shall be blessed above all other peoples: there shall be no sterile male or female among you or among your livestock.

יהוה will ward off from you all sickness; [God] will not bring upon you any of the dreadful diseases of Egypt, about which you know, but will inflict them upon all your enemies. (New JPS Translation)

There are many good questions which would be justified to ask about these verses. Surely, they seem to be an exaggeration - or, at least, it is not easy for us to understand what is promised here.

One would be hard pressed to articulate a more stark understanding of Divine reward and punishment. It seems like Moses is saying here “if you listen to these laws and

cherish the covenant, then you will have every good thing imaginable and no hard things, no sickness or illness, no infertility or food insecurity.”

Yet, when we look around the world today, and when we look back through the annals of our histories, we see clearly that everyone faces illness and sickness; even the most apparently righteous are sometimes struck with cancer or experience chronic poverty.

How could this be? Where is the Divine justice?

These kinds of questions and the responses to them are often called Theodicy - attempts to justify what seems to be evil or injustice. Many, many books of theodicy have been written from a variety of theological perspectives, both Jewish and not. In recent history, as you can imagine, Jewish theodicy has been shaped by the looming presence of the holocaust which presented a scale of destruction and injustice which seems to escape all possible justification. So, I will not attempt here a theodicy - to answer the question of why the world does not seem to reflect the biblical vision of material reward for good behavior and punishment for wickedness.

Rather, I would like to raise an objection to this picture of reward and punishment from the vantage point of concern for the personal spirituality and morality of human beings. From this perspective, G-d's promise of rewarding us for performing good deeds undercuts the whole point of performing good deeds. For example, If you know that you will be rewarded with wealth - miraculously - for having given tzedakah, then giving tzedakah isn't actually a sacrifice. You are merely giving away some money because you expect that it will be replenished.

We might consider a child who knows that if he apologizes to a teacher for being disrespectful, then he will be allowed to join his friends on the playground for recess rather than sitting in time-out. Undoubtedly, the child will apologize, even if he feels no real regret for his action. In which case, what is the point of the apology? If anything,

pushing the child to apologize could be considered pushing the child towards a kind of dishonesty?

In general society and in Judaism, our ethical aspiration is for people to do good without expectation of reward, praise or reciprocity. In English, we call this altruism.

In the Mishnah , this ideal is expressed in Pirkei Avot 1:3 by Antigonus:

אַנְטִיגֶנוֹס אִישׁ סוֹכוֹ קִבֵּל מִשְׁמֵעוֹן הַצְּדִיק. הוּא הָיָה אוֹמֵר, אֶל תְּהִי כְעֹבְדִים הַמְּשֻׁמְשִׁין אֶת הָרֵב עַל מְנַת לְקִבֵּל פְּרָס, אֲלָא הוּוּ כְעֹבְדִים הַמְּשֻׁמְשִׁין אֶת הָרֵב שְׁלֵא עַל מְנַת לְקִבֵּל פְּרָס, וַיְהִי מוֹרָא שָׁמַיִם עֲלֵיכֶם:

Antigonus a man of Socho received [the oral tradition] from Shimon the Righteous. He used to say: do not be like servants who serve the master in the expectation of receiving a reward, but be like servants who serve the master without the expectation .of receiving a reward, and let the fear of Heaven be upon you

Speaking about our relationship to G-d using a human metaphor, this proto-rabbinic leader of ancient Israel encourages us to live our lives in a posture of service without expectation of reward. We should simply (purely) be motivated by a sense of Awe as we look to the heavens, rather than an expectation that manna will rain down as a prize.

When we take this explicit ethical ideal into consideration, then our parsha's presentation of the system of Divine reward and punishment becomes even more objectionable. Not only does it conflict with our experience of this world - perhaps, we would not want to live in a world where we knew that good behavior would be rewarded with prosperity and health while bad behavior would be punished with sickness and poverty.

This tension was explored before by multiple generations of Jews. R' Yisrael Ba'al Shem, of blessed memory, an innovative early modern spiritual leader who is mythically considered the founder of Hasidism, apparently emphasized the importance

of the value reflected above in Pirkei Avos. Several of his teachings, as reported by his students, discuss how one should not be motivated by earthly reward when engaging in spiritual practice. Rather, our goal should simply be the benefit of having engaged for a moment in the performance of a mitzvah - something which facilitates our connection to G-d. Whether or not we receive a reward should be irrelevant, for the spiritual practitioner.

However, as Rabbi Levi Yitzhak of Berditchyv, one of the leaders of the early Hasidic movement, taught “most people are not capable of this at the beginning.” Most of us are motivated throughout our lives by a desire for reward. We want to see the fruits of our labor. We hope to be compensated for our work; when we exercise, we want to feel stronger or look slimmer. When we study, we want to feel like we have become smarter or achieved more mastery of material. Even when we engage in conversation with someone, we often want to feel like the conversation was “productive.”

So, this is where the Torah must meet us. As human beings, as biological creatures, we crave rewards. Therefore, G-d, in G-d's infinite wisdom and understanding, revealed to us this picture of reward and punishment which we encounter in the Torah in the hope of incentivizing us to set out on the right path, with the hope that we will grow to a stage of spiritual maturity where we will no longer even hunger for a reward for our good choices, like a lollipop after a doctor's appointments.

There is another statement in the Talmud (Pesachim 50B) which describes this process of spiritual maturation with regard to learning Torah:

אָמַר רַב הוֹדָה אָמַר רַב: לְעוֹלָם יַעֲסוֹק אָדָם בְּתוֹרָה וּמִצְוֹת אֵף עַל פִּי שֶׁלֹּא לְשִׂמְחָה, שֶׁמִּתּוֹךְ שֶׁלֹּא לְשִׂמְחָה
בָּא לְשִׂמְחָה

Rav Yehuda said that Rav said: A person should always engage in Torah study and performance of mitzvot, even if he does so not for their own sake, as through the performance of mitzvot not for their own sake, one gains understanding and comes to perform them for their own sake.

Only through engaging in a behavior in a manner where we hope to see a reward, can we possibly arrive at a point in which we will be able to act in that same way without hope or expectation for a reward. And this is our goal. Though we plead with G-d every year to inscribe us in the book of life, we know that at some point we will meet the end of our life in this world. And, regardless, we aspire to do good, to live lives of goodness, love, and compassion because we know that is what is right.

According to the 16th century Italian rabbi and commentator on our parsha, Ovadiah ben Yaakov Sforno - this is actually what is being taught in our parsha. In the first verse when we read "if you guard over the love that has been promised to your ancestors" Sforno understands this to mean "if you serve G-d only from love and not without any expectation of earthly reward" - then, and only then, might you be rewarded with earthly blessing for your lovingkindness.

May we all be inspired to live lives of compassion and whole-hearted service without the expectation of being rewarded.