

# *Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality*

From Rav Binny Freedman

## **(Portion of Bechukotai)**

*A story is told of a Jewish man who was riding on the subway reading a newspaper of the Klu Klux Klan. A friend of his, who happened to be riding in the same subway car, noticed this strange phenomenon. Very upset, he approached the newspaper reader, "Moshe, have you lost your mind? Why are you reading a Klu Klux Klan newspaper?"*

*Moshe replied: "I used to read the Jewish newspaper, but what did I find? Jews being persecuted, Israel being attacked, Jews disappearing through assimilation and intermarriage, Jews living in poverty. So I switched to the Klu Klux Klan newspaper. Now what do I find? Jews own all the banks, Jews control the media, Jews are all rich and powerful, and Jews rule the world. The news is so much better!"*

Sometimes, it seems life is all about perspective.

Some time ago, I received the following via e-mail:

*A frail old man went to live with his son, daughter-in-law, and four-year old grandson. The old man's hands trembled, his eyesight was blurred, and his step faltered.*

*The family ate together at the table. But the elderly grandfather's shaky hands and failing sight made eating difficult. Peas rolled off his spoon onto the floor. When he grasped the glass, milk spilled on the tablecloth. The son and daughter-in-law became irritated with the mess.*

*"We must do something about grandfather," said the son. I've had enough of his spilled milk, noisy eating, and food on the floor. So the husband and wife set a small table in the corner. There, Grandfather ate alone while the rest of the family enjoyed dinner. Since Grandfather had broken a dish or two, his food was served in a wooden bowl.*

*When the family glanced in grandfather's direction, sometimes he had a tear in his eye as he sat alone. Still, the only words the couple had for him were sharp admonitions when he dropped a fork or spilled food. The four-year-old watched it all in silence.*

*One evening before supper, the father noticed his son playing with wood scraps on the floor. He asked the child sweetly, "What are you making?" Just as sweetly, the boy responded, "Oh, I am making a little bowl for you and Mama to eat your food in when I grow up." The four-year-old smiled and went back to work.*

*The words so struck the parents that they were speechless, and tears started to stream down their cheeks. Though no word was spoken, both knew what had to be done. That evening the husband took Grandfather's hand and gently led him back to the family table. For the remainder of his days, he ate every meal with the family. And for some reason, neither husband nor wife seemed to care any longer when a fork was dropped, milk spilled, or the tablecloth soiled.*

*Regardless of your relationship with your parents, you'll miss them when they're gone from your life, and making a "living" is not the same thing as making a "life."*

This week's portion, *Bechukotai*, contains one of the most difficult and painful sections in the entire Torah. Known as the *Tochacha*, or rebuke, (admonition), in these thirty verses (VaYikra 26:14-43) the

Torah describes the series of horrendous calamities that will befall the Jewish people should they fail to live up to their mission as a holy people and a light unto the nations.

The challenging implication of these verses is that all of the terrible events that the Jewish people have suffered through the ages are somehow the result or consequence of the mistakes we have made, and the transgressions we have violated.

The list of questions this raises is challenging to say the least. Are we to assume that so many innocent people, including over a million children who perished in the Holocaust suffered because somehow they did not live up to the will of G-d? Who indeed would want to believe in a G-d that could allow such events to transpire, much less want a relationship with such a G-d? Why in fact would G-d want such a relationship, where people obey or worship Him purely for fear of retribution?

It is interesting to note that while so many focus on the inevitable dilemmas these verses raise, we often miss the equally challenging questions raised by the first section of our portion, the blessings.

Before the Torah delineates what will go wrong when we do not heed the word of G-d, it first specifies all the blessings we will merit if we do live up to our responsibilities as a people.

*“If you will follow in the path of my statutes, and safeguard my commandments, and fulfill them, then I will give your rains in their time, and the land will give forth its bounty, and the tree of the field will yield its fruit.” (26:3-4)*

In other words, if we do right by G-d, then G-d will do right by us. This raises a number of equally challenging questions, which are well worth considering.

First of all, is this really true? If the Torah is indeed suggesting that when we adhere to a path of Torah and *mitzvot*, that we will be rewarded and blessed with prosperity, this just does not seem to bear up to the scrutiny of the world around us. There is tragically no shortage of people who seem to live up to the way of life the Torah desires, and yet live lives far from prosperity and often with great suffering.

And, beyond the question of whether indeed G-d rewards those who adhere to the way of life these verses seem to demand, lies the theological challenge such a system poses, especially in light of traditional Jewish sources.

*“Antig’nos, a man of Socho received the tradition from Shimon the Tzaddik. He used to say: Do not be like the servant who serves the Master in order to receive reward, rather be like the servant who serves the Master not in order to receive reward, and may the fear of heaven be upon you.” (Avot, 1:3)*

In other words, our relationship with G-d should not be out of a desire to be rewarded, nor out of fear of punishment, but rather simply because we desire a closer relationship with the Creator of the world. Which again leaves us wondering what the purpose of the entire recipe of blessings and curses in this week’s portion is all about?

It is interesting that **Rashi**, at the beginning of our portion seems to further complicate this question:

*“If you will follow in the path of my statutes”: This obviously cannot be speaking about the fulfillment of the commandments, because this is the next part of the verse: “and safeguard my commandments, and fulfill them,” rather, this means (quoting the Midrash here) you shall toil in the study of Torah, and “safeguard my commandments” means that the reason you should struggle to study Torah, is because this will allow you to keep and fulfill the mitzvot.” (Rashi 26:3)*

In other words, the condition upon which the economic prosperity the Torah seems to promise is predicated is not the fulfillment of the commandments but rather the study of Torah necessary in order to fulfill the *mitzvot*. This would seem to imply that someone who fulfills the *mitzvot* without studying Torah does not merit the rewards spoken of here. Why? If a person fulfills the commandments and succeeds in being an ethical person, successfully inculcating all the religious practices of Jewish observance into his or her life, why should the reward described here be withheld, simply because he or she did not learn Torah as a part of the process?

In fact, a closer look at the language of the Midrash Rashi quotes (*Torat Kohanim Bechukotai* 1:2) is even more challenging. The Torah does not say these rewards are dependent upon the study of Torah, but in fact upon the toil in Torah (“*She’Te’hiyu A’melim Ba’Torah*”, which means that you shall *toil* or struggle in Torah). Apparently, even if you study Torah, you have to toil at it, to earn the rewards described here. And, consistently, Rashi points out (26:14) that the subsequent punishments or calamities will also be the result of *not* toiling in Torah. What is the essence of this need to toil or struggle in Torah, that seems to carry such weight in the course of our human endeavors?

It seems, the key to understanding all of these issues is to understand the meaning of Torah itself. What does it mean to study Torah? What, indeed, is Torah all about?

On a superficial level, the fundamental existential difference between a world created by G-d and a world without G-d, that exists merely as some sort of cosmic accident, is whether or not there is a purpose to our existence. If the world is an accident, then so are we, and while we can strive to give our accidental lives meaning, in the end, we are all random results of a random process.

But if Hashem (G-d) created the world, then creation implies purpose, and that means that everything and everyone in this world is created for a reason.

*Holocaust survivor and creator of logo-therapy Victor Frankel, posits in his masterpiece Man’s Search For Meaning, that the essential ingredient that drives us in this world is our search for meaning. Fascinated by the way different people dealt with the hardships of concentration camp life in completely different ways, he noted one particular fellow who arrived in Auschwitz with one of his students and became determined to pass on to this youth a particular tractate of Talmud, which he knew largely by heart.*

*Whenever he would see this Rebbe (teacher), whether on work detail, or at night in the barracks, and often even at role call, when he thought no one was watching, he was always with his student whispering the sacred words of Talmud under his breath.*

*And even in Auschwitz, in the midst of all the death that surrounded them, this Rebbe always seemed so alive, and so full of purpose. It seemed as though no matter what happened around them, he always had a spring in his step, and others seemed to take strength from being around him.*

*Until one day he actually completed the tractate he was teaching the boy, for which he had been living. And then Frankel watched as the weight of his reality broke him down and he became what was known as a musselman, one of the living dead who had given up on life. These inmates were immediately discernible by the vacant stare in their eyes and were avoided by other prisoners; you never knew when they would just stop what they were doing and walk over to one of the fences or defy the guards, no longer caring whether they lived or died. And when the guards started shooting, they didn’t care where their bullets landed.*

*How could someone so full of life one day simply lose the desire to go on the next? Frankel concluded that what drives human beings above all else, is our search for meaning.*

If indeed we are created by G-d, then that purpose we so crave is not simply a random delusion we have created for ourselves, which can never stand up to the light of true introspection, rather, it is the purpose for which Hashem placed us in this world to begin with.

And if indeed G-d created us all for a reason, it makes no sense for G-d not to at some point, communicate or reveal to us what that purpose is. After all, what would be the point of there being a purpose to our sojourn in this world, if we never learned what that purpose was?

This is why every religion that believes in a G-d, inevitably has a revelation, a point at which G-d reveals to the world their purpose.

For the Jewish people that point in time occurred three thousand years ago at Sinai, and the Torah is essentially the recipe of purpose for what we are meant to be doing, and who we are meant to become in this life.

Torah, then, is all about purpose. And the study of Torah is the opportunity essentially, to tap into the thought process of G-d. Torah is not meant to be merely an intellectual accruing of knowledge; it is meant to be an opportunity to experience G-d. Indeed, it is the fabric of our relationship with G-d in this world.

People often consider the Torah to be a book, or series of books, written down and given us at a specific point in time. And this can delude us into thinking that the Torah was created at a certain point in time, from which point on we began to glean its wisdom. But in truth, if the Torah is the revelation of our purpose, and the chance to tap into the thought process of G-d, then it must always have been so. G-d could not have thought of the Torah one day, because that would mean that the day before, G-d was less than He is now, because He had not yet thought of Torah, something that certainly does not fit with the Jewish perception of G-d.

Ultimately then, the study of Torah is the process of developing a relationship with G-d. It represents our ability to find meaning in all that we do, and everything we see.

This then, may be what this week's portion is all about. Perhaps the 'reward' that comes as a result of this toiling in Torah is that life becomes its own reward. Indeed, everything is a blessing once it has a purpose. And even that which seems to have no purpose, or at least whose purpose we are simply not capable of ever understanding in this world, such as human suffering, does not change the way we look at the world, because much higher than finding purpose in every thing, and struggling to fathom that purpose every time we see something new, is the ability to embrace a reality of the source of all purpose, recognizing that if we live in a world of purpose, then everything has purpose, and life is its own reward.

It is not that we can ever answer the question of how and why the Jewish people have suffered so much over the millennium; it is that the question no longer challenges us in the same way.

As an example, every time we eat a meal with bread and say the Grace after meals (the *Birkat Ha'Mazon*), we conclude with a few very challenging verses:

*"I was a lad, and I have grown old, and have not seen a Tzaddik (righteous person) who is abandoned, and his offspring begging bread. May Hashem give strength to his people, and may Hashem bless his people with (actually: in) peace."* (Psalms 37, and 29)

And again, it seems that this just isn't true; there are plenty of righteous people who are indeed abandoned, so it seems, and certainly whose children had to beg for bread. (A day in the Warsaw ghetto would have demonstrated this point.)

Unless we choose to read this verse from a completely different perspective: A true Tzaddik is never abandoned, and he is never alone.

The verse tells us: “*Tzaddik Be’Emunato’ Yichyeh*”, which we usually take to mean that the righteous live on faith alone. But **Rav Kook** (in his *Midot HaRe’ayah* ) points out that faith is the way we view the world. When we believe that everything has purpose, we are then seeing the world through completely different lenses. A Tzaddik lives in a very different world because he sees the world in a completely different way. Everything has meaning, and everything comes from G-d.

And this ability to see the world in a different way, and to live in a world that is really all about blessing, stems from our relationship with Torah, which is really about our relationship with G-d.

If a person has a deep relationship with G-d, then he will have a deep life. And everything in life, even the things most of us perceive to be a curse, are actually all part of the same world of blessing, because if it all comes from G-d, then it all has purpose.

Conversely, if we do not have a relationship with Torah, nay G-d, then it is much easier to live in a world that is cursed. Because there is no purpose, there is only what we feel good about. And as soon as we don’t feel good about anything (a very easy proposition when life is random), then our lives are, to whatever degree, cursed.

And this also explains why, in describing the calamities that will befall us, the Torah does not simply say ‘if you will not hearken to G-d and desist from fulfilling the *mitzvot*’ (commandments) then all these terrible things will befall you.

The Torah rather adds: “*If you will be disgusted by my mitzvot...*” (26:15) because the issue here is not about what you do, it is much more about why we are doing it.

It is really about the difference between being with someone and being in love with someone. Which is why this Torah demands struggle, because any relationship requires a lot of work.

And lastly, this is the meaning of the Mishnah from *Avot* we quoted above. After all, if we should not serve the Master to get a reward, then obviously we should serve the Master *without* any desire to receive a reward! Why the need to repeat the sentence, instead of just saying we should not serve Hashem for reward?

Perhaps the point is not to expect that you will *receive* a reward *for* your efforts, because it is the effort that is in fact the reward. We are meant to do what we do, “*not in order to receive*” precisely because if we view everything we do as its own reward, there is really no reward to receive; we already have all the reward we could ever need. We have an entire world and everything in it, which is the reward!

And this is why the Mishnah there concludes: “*and may the fear of heaven be upon you.*” Because the word *morah*’, mistranslated as fear, really means awe, from the root *lir’ot*, to see. **Antig’nos of Socho** was suggesting that the challenge and the essence of life in this world is to see heaven on earth, every day, in everything we do.

May we all be blessed to see the world through entirely different glasses, which see only blessing, and may this become easier to do, soon.

Shabbat Shalom,

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