



Bechukosai: Always Purposeful

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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. Your threshing will last until the vintage, and the vintage will last until the sowing; you will eat your food to satiety, and you will live in security in your land (Vayikra 26:3-5)

It seems to be a straightforward system; follow the commandments and statutes of God, and God will reward you with all types of material blessings. Conversely if we don't follow the laws and commandments then God will punish us. These verses raise many theological and ideological questions and difficulties. Is this how the world really works? Don't we find that at times the righteous suffer and the wicked prosper? We often see people who seem to do all God wants and expects of them yet, they have exceptionally difficult lives. The commentaries provide many insights to address these issues.

But I would like to draw your attention to a different issue. The Torah seems to indicate that reward can (and perhaps, should) be part of our motivation for following the laws and commandments. Yet, we find a seemingly contradictory statement in Pirkei Avos (Ethics of the Fathers):

"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. And the fear of Heaven should be upon you (1:3)."

The great sage, Antignos teaches us that one should not serve God for the sake of receiving reward! How do we reconcile this teaching with the verses in the beginning of these week's Parsha?

In discussing the obligation to honor one's parents the Talmud (Kiddushin 31a) brings the story of an idolater name *Dama ben Nisina*. The Talmud relates that Dama was exceptionally wealthy and possessed precious stones that were needed for the breastplate (*choshen*) of the Kohen Gadol (High Priest). A rabbinic delegation approached Dama and made a generous offer for the precious stones. Dama responded that he could not sell them the stones as the key to the safe (in which the stones were kept) was under his father's pillow and his father was sleeping. Dama would not wake his father even for a small fortune. This explains the Talmud is the paradigmatic example of honoring one's parents. But the story is not over. A year later a red heifer (*Parah Aduma*) was born in Dama's flock. The rabbis approached Dama eager to purchase this rare animal. Dama responded, *"I know that I can ask for all the money in the world and you (the rabbis) would give it to me. But I will only ask for the money I lost for honoring my father."* Dama could have extorted an exorbitant amount – but he chose instead to only ask for what he lost when he was unable to sell the stones.

The commentaries point out Dama's intriguing statement; *"I will only ask for the money I lost for honoring my father."* This word choice provides us incredible insight into Dama's personality. It is true he didn't wake his father. But when the rabbis left, Dama felt like he had lost an incredible opportunity. *But Dama, you didn't lose! You gained a magnificent mitzvah.* From Dama's perspective he suffered a loss. His intention was that honoring his father would produce great reward – but he was wrong, he lost out on the deal of the century. He didn't get what he hoped for through the performance of this mitzvah and therefore, he felt he had lost out.

This is the meaning of Antignos' statement. When a servant works a full day, if the master claims that he can't pay, the servant feels not only wronged because he is not being compensated but also because he wasted his time. *I would have never worked or performed these tasks had I known that what I set out to receive would not end up actualizing.* When it comes to the service of God we must remain far from this mindset. Is there reward for our mitzvos, good deeds and positive acts? Of course there is. This is clear from the opening verses of our Parsha. There is reward in this world and there is reward in the World to Come. There is no good deed that goes unnoticed or unrewarded. How that reward is delivered is a bit more complex. God has a system and often it defies our comprehension. Sometimes, God takes reward generated by my actions and allocates it to my children, as they may need it more than I. Sometimes, I am the beneficiary of certain blessings generated by the actions of those who came before me. There is beautiful reward for all we do – the allocation and distribution is understood only by God. We must understand that when it comes to the service of God, even if I don't get what I wanted or what I had hoped for, my efforts are never in vein. Every mitzvah, every act of kindness has the benefit of creating a relationship with God. In fact the Torah states, *"And I will place My dwelling in your midst, and My Spirit will not reject you; I will walk among you and be your God, and you will be My people (Vayikra 26:11-12)."* After all the discussion of material blessing the Torah explains that the most important result we can realize from our service of God, is a relationship with God. Even if the wheat, barely, and grapes don't blossom as I had hoped. Even if the cattle, the sheep and livestock aren't as plentiful as I had imagined – my service, my mitzvos are never in vein. For as a result of all you have done, *I will walk in your midst and I will enjoy a relationship with you.*

We live in a result driven society. If you can't quantify the results we often assume this means I failed. While this may be true in certain areas of life it is not true when it comes to spirituality. There are times when we pray, perform acts of kindness and give *tzedaka* because we need and want something from God. There are many times when we see the beautiful results of our actions and there are many times when we simply don't get what we want. Whether we actively see the *beracha* (blessing) or not, one thing is clear, every spiritual act is purposeful and meaningful. Every spiritual act creates closeness and holiness. Every time we serve God, we have the opportunity bring Him close to us and have the privilege to be just a bit closer to Him.