



Behar-Bechukosai: Always Profitable

Rabbi Shmuel Silber

"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, God will punish us. These verses raise many theological and ideological questions. 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. This is the age-old question, deliberated by the sages throughout the generations. Yet, despite all the insights and explanations we have no real understanding other than to accept our inability to comprehend the ways of God.

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. However, 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 this week's Parsha?

In discussing the obligation to honor one's parents, the Talmud (Kiddushin 31a) brings the story of an idolater named *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 herd. 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 (rabbis) would give it to me. But I will only ask for the money I lost for honoring my father."

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. When blessed with the red heifer he felt he was given the opportunity to be made whole. Dama was indeed a great man who clearly revered and honored his father. But he failed to comprehend the power of a good deed. He didn't lose anything. Although he couldn't sell the precious jewels, he earned a most incredible spiritual windfall.

This is the meaning of Antignos' statement. When a servant works a full day, if the master claims he can't pay, the servant feels both wronged (because of the non-payment) and that he wasted his time. He thinks, "I would have never worked or performed these tasks had I known that what I set out to receive would not end up materializing." 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? Unequivocally, yes. 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 it often defies our comprehension. Sometimes God takes reward generated by our actions and allocates it to our children, as they may need it more than us. Sometimes, we are the beneficiaries of certain blessings generated by the actions of



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those who came before us. 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 we don't get what we wanted or had hoped for, our 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, barley, and grapes don't blossom as we had hoped. Even if the cattle, the sheep and livestock aren't as plentiful as we had imagined, our service, our actions, our mitzvos are never in vein. As a result of all we have done, "I will walk in your midst and I will enjoy a relationship with you."

We live in a result driven society. If we can't quantify the results, it must mean we 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, learn, 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.