



Bechukosai – Make it Rain

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 appears to be a simple formula: do what God asks of you and things will work out well; disobey and there will be catastrophic circumstances. Despite the simplicity of the message, there is an obvious yet profound theological issue; at times the righteous suffer and the wicked prosper. Life doesn't always seem to follow the pattern articulated in the verse. But there is another simpler, more nuanced question I would like to focus on. We are taught in Pirkei Avos (Ethics of Our 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?

The Ohr HaChaim (Rabbi Chaim Attar, 1696-1743) explains that God isn't promising reward, He is allowing us to share in the bounty we help to create through our dynamic spiritual service. When we serve God, fulfill the mandates and *mitzvos* of the Torah, we create blessing in this world. God is promising us a portion in the very blessing we help to create.

Perhaps, we can take this idea a bit farther. There is a concept found in rabbinic literature, *b'derech she'adam rotzeh ley'lech, molichin oso* (the path which a person chooses to take, is the path he is led down). God gives us the gift of *bechira* (free choice). We have the right to choose our direction and lifestyle and when we clearly articulate through word or deed the path we intend to take, God assists us in travelling down that road. As such, when we person decides to be holy, to live a meaningful life and positively impact the world, God helps him/her make this a reality. One of the greatest challenges we face in this temporal, physical world is seeing to our material needs. Anyone who has ever experienced financial hardship knows that monetary stress is not *an* issue, it becomes *the* issue. Financial stress impacts everything from *shalom bayis* (marital harmony), to self-esteem. For most of us, when there is financial stress, there is often little bandwidth for spirituality. When one is struggling financially it often takes all his inner strength to just keep his head above water. Perhaps, this is what God is telling us. *Im b'chukosai tey'leychu, u'mitzvosai tishmiru*, (If you follow My statutes and observe My commandments and perform them): if you make the conscious decision in word and deed to live a life of holiness, to find your inner spiritual strength, to become something beautiful and necessary, then, *v'nasati gishmeychem b'itam* (I will give your rains in their time). This is not a reward for your good deeds, this is the investment capital to allow you to continue on your journey of spiritual growth. God looks to us to make the decision about the people we want to be and lives we want to lead. If we make the right kind of decisions, if we are truly genuine in our desire to be something better, then He will help us along this path, removing some of the material obstacles which are often a source of stress.

Life is often not as black and white as articulated in the above-mentioned verses. There are many factors which go into God's decision making and running of the universe. But the message is clear. Decide on the kind of person you want to be and life you want do lead. Articulate your goals and life aspirations. Decide how you are going to make the world a better place. Know in your heart, that if your decisions are the correct, God will help you along your life journey.