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THE LEARN IT UP NEWSLETTER

Read it Up

What Moshe's Promises Really Mean

By Avraham Ben Haim

The bulk of this week's *parasha* recounts the giving over of "the blessing" and "the curse" on two mountains, called *Gerizim* and *Eival*. Moshe Rabbeinu tells the people that the Torah contains much potential, both for success and failure. If the citizens of Israel observe the Torah, they will be given financial and social success. If they abandon the Torah, they will be granted the opposite.

My teacher and father, Harav Eliyahu Ben-Haim, likes to point out an important observation regarding this concept. It does not mean that reward and punishment for the Torah are only granted in this world. Jewish tradition and philosophy have stressed countless times that the reward for keeping Torah is neither tangible, nor does it exist solely in the world we know of. Reward and punishment is a major component of *olam habbah*.

What, then, does Moshe Rabbeinu mean when he promises us financial and social success for observing the Torah, and failure for abandoning it?

The answer can be found in Maimonides' explanation to the Mishnah, at the beginning of the tenth chapter of Sanhedrin. In this section of his work, he explains several concepts critical to Jewish ideology, including reward and punishment. He explains that Moshe's promise of financial and social wellbeing is not a *reward* for keeping Torah at all.

Rather, Moshe is promising us that if we show God that we care about His commandments, and we truly wish to live our lives by them, He will enable us to continue to do so

without needless trouble and extraneous effort. All obstacles will be removed from our way. Food will be plentiful, war unheard of, and this way, distractions from serving God will be minimal. Conversely, if we neglect God and His commandments, obstacles will be placed in our way and the Torah will become more and more difficult to observe. Our *hakhamim* (Sages) alluded to this idea in their collection of *mishnayot* titled *Avot*, where they say (4:2), "A *mitzvah* is rewarded with another *mitzvah*, and an *averah* (sin) with another *averah*."

Maimonides stresses the importance of differentiating between this and the true reward for keeping the Torah. The reward which will be given to those who live by the Torah is not physical. He mocks those that expect a cloudy, everlasting retreat after they pass away, where silk garments grow from trees and the rivers flow aged wine. These are rewards which cater to the senses, which are part of the body, and which will be left behind at death. He writes that we cannot grasp the nature of the reward-to-come, the same way we cannot grasp the concept of a soul, yet he assures us that it is not tangible.

I believe that this is an important idea to bear in mind when we read the "blessing" and the "curse" of *parashat Ki Tavo*, as well as when we progress throughout life in general.



Mashal of the Week

The following is a passage from the book of *Mishlei* (Proverbs), written by one of the wisest men who ever lived, King Solomon (*Shlomo HaMelekh*):

My child, if sinners seduce you, do not be enticed... For the net seems spread out with free (bait) in the eyes of every winged creature, but they (the hunters) wait in ambush for their blood and lurk for their souls. (Proverbs 1:7, 17-18)

When a bird is flying in the sky, and he sees a net spread out with food in the middle, what does he think? "Free food! What could be better!? Let me fly down and grab it. Nothing bad can come out of it!" Little does he know that this food is just a trap.

What Shlomo HaMelekh is telling us is that many times in life we will see something in front of us which looks great! And we want to go after it. At times, it doesn't seem like there will be any consequences for our sins. "Only GOOD will come out this! It looks so GOOD!"

Shlomo HaMelekh is telling us that when it comes to sinning, no good will ever come out of it. Even though it seems so great and enjoyable right now, we have to have the foresight to realize the future outcome of our actions.



Understanding the Text

What's Real Happiness?

In this week's parasha the Torah tells us:

And you shall rejoice with all the good that Hashem, your God has given you... (Devarim 26:11)

At first I didn't understand this verse too well. Why does the Torah need to tell us to be happy when we have good things? Isn't it quite obvious?

Apparently it's not that simple. The nature of human beings is to constantly want more than what they presently have. Our Sages alluded to this concept when they stated: "Who is truly rich? One who is happy in his lot" (Avot 4:1). It is indeed a difficult task for one to be genuinely happy with what he has. Hence, as the popular saying goes, "more money, more problems."

The Torah is telling a person to open his eyes and see all the amazing things that Hakadosh Baruch Hu is constantly giving him and be happy with just that. The fact that each morning we wake up and we can breathe is the greatest gift of them all. It often occurs that people take life for granted and complain about what they lack rather than rejoicing in all the great things that they have.

I hope that now we can truly understand the deep significance of this verse. Each person must look at what he has: his life, family, friends, etc., and find what to rejoice in. The same way that there is always something to complain about in life there is also something to be happy about, all you have to do is look!



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