

Reward and punishment

Bechukotai 5782/2022

One might be forgiven in thinking, following the reading of this week's Parasha, that Judaism was very concerned with the idea of reward and punishment. While you wouldn't be entirely wrong, the caricature of a little angel sitting on one shoulder, and the devil sitting on the other, showing you what awaits every decision and transgression, is not something that Judaism cares much about, and ultimately distracts from our understanding of reward and punishment.

The Parasha opens by telling us that if you follow all the commands, these good things will happen to you¹. Several verses later we get the reverse, if you don't do these things, then this is what awaits².

There are two questions that arise from these sections. Firstly, all the blessings and curses relate to physical occurrences, The Seforno notes this with some surprise, surely reward for obedience and fidelity to divine law should be spiritual enlightenment?³ Secondly, It is very clear from reading through both sections, that the verses relating to the curses are far more detailed than those relating to the blessings, leading one to think that Judaism has an unhealthy relationship with punishment.

Pirkei Avot, would teach us that while adherence and transgression have physical consequences, they also have psychological or sociological spiritual benefits, where one positive action leads to another, and vice versa⁴. However, the overall focus on the physical is representative of the psychological mode in which one is going to wake up and listen, people will take a gamble on spiritual fulfilment, they won't take one on food to feed their children.

The Ibn Ezra answers the second question by making us understand that the curses or punishment are not given with more detail because they are more weighted in that area, rather because God uses it as a scare tactic, offering more explicit detail of what might occur, to ensure the Jewish people understand and take heed⁵. Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks notes that throughout the Talmud we see the motif of God struggling at any time where there is divine retribution, so much so, that He puts himself in exile alongside the Jewish people following the destruction of the Temple⁶.

God does not want punishment, we have to understand that it is available, it can be used, it will be used, and it can be severe, but it is not what God ultimately wants, it goes against His very essence – after all He is the God of mercy, and benevolence.

The Sefer Halkkarim a book of Jewish fundamental principles (written by Rabbi Joseph Albo in the 15th century) also notes that while punishment and reward is a central aspect of Judaism, it is never a focus on the individual, rather it is about the collective. Once again, Judaism pushes us to consistently think about the welfare of the entire community, because when operate under that mode, we are able to make decisions, and do actions, that bring about the betterment for all of society.

All citations can be found in **A New Page of Talmud**