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*Reward and  
punishment*

*Rabbi Alon Meltzer*

*A New Page of Talmud –  
Bechukotai 5782*



If you follow My laws and faithfully observe My commandments, I will grant your rains in their season, so that the earth shall yield its produce and the trees of the field their fruit - **Vayikra 26:3-4**<sup>1</sup> But if you do not obey Me and do not observe all these commandments, if you reject My laws and spurn My rules, so that you do not observe all My commandments and you break My covenant,. I in turn will do this to you: I will wreak misery upon you—consumption and fever,\* which cause the eyes to pine and the body to languish; you shall sow your seed to no purpose, for your enemies shall eat it.- **Vayikra 26:14-16**<sup>2</sup> Why is the reward for keeping Torah and mitzvot all physical things, as written in this covenant, and not soul perfection, and spiritual reward in the afterlife, given that death is the end of all humans, and the true measure of their success and essential goodness? Also, the enemies have gone out of their gates and lied, pointing out to this verse as the proof that there is no spiritual reward for Israel after death because of this. And also this is difficult: how would the produce given according to the observance of mitzvot, since the reward to the one who observes the mitzvah is rain on the land, in its time, but for the sinner that the sky would close, and rain would not fall? – **Seforno on Vayikra 26:3**<sup>3</sup> Ben Azzai said: Be quick in performing a minor commandment as in the case of a major one, and flee from transgression; For one commandment leads to another commandment, and transgression leads to another transgression; For the reward for performing a commandment is another commandment and the reward for committing a transgression is a transgression. – **Pirkei Avot 4:2**<sup>4</sup> The empty heads say that there are more curses than blessings. However, they do not speak the truth. What Scripture does is to speak of the blessings in general terms. However, it lists the curses in detail in order to frighten and scare the listeners. What I

If you follow My laws...

אִם-בְּחֻקֵי תִלְכוּ  
**Vayikra 26:3**

say will be clear to the one who reads the text carefully. – **Ibn Ezra on Vayikra 26:14**<sup>5</sup> The reason the curses are so dramatic is not because God seeks to punish, but the precise opposite. The Talmud tells us that God weeps when He allows disaster to strike His people: “Woe to Me, that due to their sins I destroyed My house, burned My Temple and exiled them [My children] among the nations of the world.”[2] The curses were meant as a warning. They were intended to deter, scare, discourage. They are like a parent warning a young child not to play with electricity. The parent may deliberately intend to scare the child, but he or she does so out of love, not severity.. – **Rabbi Lord Jonathan**

**Sacks** <sup>6</sup> Sefer Ha-ikkarim suggests another philosophical explanation, pointing out that the Torah focuses on the collective reward and punishment of the Jewish people, as opposed to the

individual.[10] Therefore, the Torah does not mention reward and punishment in the afterlife, because in the afterlife, each individual is judged independently and there is no collective reward or punishment. In this world, however, physical success is granted to a righteous nation even if some of its members are wicked, and they naturally share in the success and prosperity of their nation. Likewise, physical punishment will be meted out to a wicked nation, and even the righteous amongst them will necessarily suffer along with their compatriots. The Torah mentions only this-worldly reward and punishment, then, in order to restrict its focus to the Jewish collective. – **Rabbi Assaf Bednarsh** <sup>7</sup>

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