

MORASHAH
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Parashat HaShavuah Series

Parashat B'har-B'chukotai

Remember the old song *Rose Garden*?

I beg your pardon,
 I never promised you a rose garden.
 Along with the sunshine,
 There's gotta be a little rain sometimes.

God never said that this life would be a *Gan Eden*, a Garden of Eden. Yet, we also know that Hashem never told us that this life must be a *Gehinom*, a Hell.

It is no wonder that Pirkei Avot teaches us: "He (Rabbi Yaakov) also would say: 'Better is one hour of penitence and good deeds in this world than all the life of the world to come. Better is one hour of spiritual repose in the world to come than all the life of this world.' " (*Ethics of the Fathers* 4:22). We need to understand that real bliss is that of immortality. This is the ultimate joy we can attain. This world is the laboratory of deeds and the opportunity to grow by our mistakes, repenting through *teshuvah*.

But then we come to our portion of *B'har-B'chukotai*, where we read the blessings and the curses. I have always been struck by the *tochacha*, or admonition, as it is called. There are graphic warnings of dire punishment. Very graphic indeed! This section of the Torah has no fewer than thirty sentences warning us what will happen if we don't listen to God's commandments! Why did God do this?

We know that the Torah speaks in the language of human beings. Perhaps part of the answer can be found in our own experience. How do we speak to a young child about the danger of crossing a busy intersection? At a very young age, the child must know that just disobeying will mean a punishment from the parents! It may be more difficult for the child to understand how he or she can get severely hurt, or God forbid killed. The consequences of an action must be given in terms that he or she can comprehend. Then when the child matures, we can supply more nuances, and even explain a safe way to cross the street.

We cannot be satisfied with a child's level of understanding the Torah or this admonition. A deeper thought can be found in Maimonides' classic *magnum opus*

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on the Written and Oral Torah, his *Mishneh Torah*. At the end of *Hilchot Teshuvah*, he offers us an amazing insight. We are not supposed to observe the *mitzvot* in order to be rewarded; instead, we should do them from pure *ahavat Hashem*, love of God. Nevertheless, there are spiritual rewards for performing God's commandments and learning Torah, just as there are negative spiritual consequences from not following God's commandments and not learning Torah.

What is the highest reward for fulfilling the *mitzvot*? Rambam tells us it is meriting the life of the World to Come. (That is even better than a "rose garden", isn't it?) Needless to say the biggest consequence of totally turning away from God could be not meriting this future.

So what is the *Tochacha* about? Maimonides teaches: "We are promised by the Torah that if we fulfill it with joy and good spirit and meditate on its wisdom at all times, [God] will remove all the obstacles that prevent us from fulfilling it, for example, sickness, war, famine, and the like."

"Similarly, He will grant us all the good that will reinforce our performance of the Torah... in order that we not be involved throughout all our days in matters required by the body, but rather will sit unburdened and [thus have the opportunity to] study wisdom and perform *mitzvot* in order that we may merit the life of the world to come."

Of course the opposite is also true.

Ah... now we can see an important point. How do the admonitions come to fruition? We are the main cause. When our will pits itself against the Torah, against God's teachings, we are vulnerable to all the consequences.

Indeed, this carries into many things in our personal life. We should have watched what we were eating and drinking; we should have been kinder to our bodies and exercised; we should have exercised our minds, and kept them focused on Hashem, on the Torah, on things that are spiritual. When we don't, we know what happens: distress, disease, and a loss of equanimity.

So, please - look at the *brachot*, the blessings, and at the *tochacha*, the admonition. The choice isn't so hard, is it?

Shabbat Shalom!

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