

Reward and punishment

Introduction

Parshat *Bechukkotai* highlights reward and punishment in stern, crystal-clear, totally unambiguous and extremely detailed terms, leaving nothing to the imagination: You will receive blessings if you follow God’s commandments, curses if you don’t. Text:

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...

You will eat your food to satiety, and you will live in security in your land. And I will grant peace in the land, and you will lie down with no one to frighten [you].

I will remove wild beasts from the land, and no army will pass through your land...

I will make you fruitful and increase you...

And I will place My dwelling in your midst... I will walk among you and be your God, and you will be My people.

I am the Lord, your God, Who took you out of the land of Egypt, from being slaves to them, and I broke the pegs of your yoke and led you upright. [Lev 26:3-13]

But if you do not listen to Me and do not perform all these commandments, and if you despise My statutes and reject My ordinances... thereby breaking My covenant, then I, too, will do the same to you.

I will order upon you shock, consumption, fever, and diseases that cause hopeless longing and depression.

You will sow your seed in vain, and your enemies will eat it...

You will be smitten before your enemies. Your enemies will rule over you.

You will flee [even though] no one will be pursuing you...

Your strength will be expended in vain.

Your land will not yield its produce...

I will incite the wild beasts of the field against you...

Your roads will become desolate...

I will incite the plague in your midst.

You will be delivered into the enemy's hands...

I will demolish your edifices and cut down your sun idols...

I will make the land desolate...

And I will scatter you among the nations...

I will bring fear in the hearts of those of you who survive in the lands of their enemies...

Despite all this ... I will not despise them nor reject them... for I am the Lord their God... [Lev 26:14-45]

Indeed, the 11th of Maimonides' "13 principles of faith" is:

I believe with perfect faith that the Creator, blessed be His name, rewards all who keep His commandments and punishes all those who transgress His commandments. [Rambam on Sanhedrin 10]

Do we always witness this?

Promises of reward and punishment are central to all religions. But do we witness them actually fulfilled? Not always. Example:

In two places in the Torah, and only two, we are promised long life if we follow two specific commandments: Honoring parents and following the law of the mother bird (*Shiluach haKen*):

-Honor your father and your mother; that your days may be long. [Ex. 20:12]

-If a bird's nest happens to be before you... and the mother is sitting upon the young..., you shall not take the mother with the young. But you shall let the mother go, and take the young for yourself, that it may be well with you, and that you may prolong your days. [Deut. 22:6-7]

Elisha ben Avuyah, one of the great rabbis of the Talmud (early 2nd-century CE), saw a man tell his son to go up on the roof and bring down some nestlings. The son obeyed, and also drove away the mother bird before removing them, thereby fulfilling those two commandments that promised a long life. He then fell down and died. This caused Elisha to reject Judaism.

How do we resolve the contradiction?

Answer 1-We have free will

Torah is meant to exhort people to goodness, but ultimately we have free will. Free will means the freedom to make wrong choices. If God were to reward us or punish us instantly and publicly after we acted, we'd be just robots. If right after we eat pork we are seized with painful cramps, and right after we give money to charity we get a raise at the office, where is our free will? We would not find it satisfying. Further, God's justice is always tempered by mercy, which

means that we are always given a chance to repent and right the wrongs we commit. This answer is also endorsed by Jewish tradition. This leads to the second answer:

Answer 2- It all evens out in the World to Come

Talmud: Some reward and punishment is in this world, and some in the next world:

- There is no reward in this world for the fulfillment of commandments. [Hul. 142a]
- The following are the things for which a man enjoys the fruits in this world while the principal remains for him in the World to Come: Honoring father and mother, performing acts of kindness, and bringing peace between a man and his fellow. But the study of Torah is equal to them all. [Peah Y 1a]
- And corresponding to these are four things for which punishment is exacted from a person in this world, while the principal punishment remains intact for him in the World to Come: Idolatry, sexual immorality, and murder. And Lashon Hara' [the evil tongue] is equal to them all. [Peah Y 8a]

Midrash: Why do the righteous suffer and the wicked prosper?

R. Akiva says: From the righteous [God] collects payment in this world for the few misdeeds they have committed, so as to give them [only] a good reward in the Time to Come. To the wicked, He gives abundant peace in this world for the few good deeds they have done, so as to inflict [only] punishment on them in the Time to Come. [Lev. R. 27:1]

Even one who never sinned may suffer (for example, a baby who dies) so that his reward in the World to Come is increased. This is known as "afflictions of love" (*yissurin shel ahavah*).

Answer 3-Virtue is its own reward and vice its own punishment

Mishna:

- Ben Azzai said: "One good deed brings another in its train, and one sin another sin, for the reward of a good deed is a good deed, and the wages of sin is sin." [Avot 4:2]
- Do not be like servants who serve their master on the condition of receiving a reward, but be like servants who serve their master without the condition of receiving a reward. [Avot 1:3]

Is a good conscience reward enough? Is a bad conscience punishment enough? For some, but not for all.

Answer 4-All bad things are indeed punishment to the victims, and good things are rewards

-Common popular reaction to ill wind: "What did I do to deserve this?"

-Consequences are "measure for measure" (*middah ke-neged middah*). Talmud:

All measures [of reward and punishment] taken by the Holy One, blessed be He, follow the principle of measure for measure. [Sanh. 90a; cf. Sot. 8b]

Midrash:

From the very creation of the world the Holy One, blessed be He, arranged that a man is measured by the measure with which that man measures. [Gen. R. 9:11]

-Answer endorsed by traditional commentators.

-The Lubavitcher Rebbe rejects it: We do not know why the Holocaust happened, especially since many victims were the most observant Jews on earth:

It is not my task to justify God on this. Only He Himself can answer for what He allowed to happen... What greater heartlessness can there be than to give a "reason" for the death and torture of millions of innocent men, women and children? ... The Holocaust does not disprove the existence of God. On the contrary, it decisively disproves faith in human-based morality. The Germans epitomized culture, scientific advance and philosophic morality, yet they perpetrated the vilest atrocities in history! The Holocaust has taught us that a moral and civilized existence is possible only through the acceptance of Divine authority. [Rebbe, summarized]

Answer 5-Reward and punishment do not apply to the individual, but to the community as a whole

In this view, God is always working for the greater good of humanity as a whole. This goal sometimes requires that some people suffer even though they did not transgress commandments.

Proponents of this answer say that the rights of the many outweigh the rights of the one, when they come into conflict. This leads to totalitarianism, where only the state counts and the individual is just a cog, whose life is expendable. It also leads to killing those who disagree with state policy.

Naturally, Judaism rejects this answer. The individual must generally take priority over the community. Mishna:

Whoever destroys one life is considered as if he destroyed an entire world; and whoever saves one life is considered as if he saved an entire world...

[Sanhedrin Y 4:1 (22a)] So everyone must say: "The world was created for my sake." [Mishna, Sanhedrin 37a]