

Shabbat Parashat B'ḥukotai Reward & Punishment as Obsolete Motivators

Fear of punishment and desire for reward serve as the biblical motivations for adherence to the laws of the Torah. The theme of reward and punishment is so powerful in our tradition that one of its key exemplary texts is positioned as the second main paragraph of the *Sh'ma*, which we find in our *siddurim* (prayer books), *m'zuzot*, and *t'filin*. Typically, the Israelites are informed that if they perform the positive *mitzvot* ("you shall do" commandments) and stay away from the behaviors forbidden in the negative *mitzvot* ("you shall not do" commandments), then the people will be blessed with rains in the proper seasons, bountiful crops, prosperous families, and success against enemy nations. In short, God's grace and protection would be with them. However, failure to obey the law would result in improper rains, sparse crops and famine, and military defeat at the hands of invading nations. The promise of such rewards and fear of these punishments were enough to keep the Israelites in line. The Bible also teaches, particularly in the prophetic period, that falling out of line was common. Divine punishments were the consequence, which led to quick repentance and a return to the path of Torah and the blessing of rewards by Israel. If any of your children are in Grade 5, ask them if this sounds familiar from their study of the Book of Judges.

At varying points during the year, students in different grades have asked me: "Rabbi Bellas, what will happen if I don't do _____ (you fill in the blank: keep kosher, observe the laws of Shabbat...etc.)?" My answer to students is to explain that while this question stems from a biblical theological perspective that human actions and behaviors have direct divine consequences, a system that our students comprehend well as a result of their studies of the Bible, this is not the way that most modern Jewish communities understand the system of the commandments. It is important for modern liberal Jews to understand that this phrasing of the question is misplaced in our day and age. We can no longer simplify our lives down to divine reward and punishment. If one does, then how is it possible to explain the prosperity of "evil" individuals or the misfortune of one who is diligent in the living of a good moral life? Are we to believe that catastrophic acts of nature or human hand are divine retribution for "sins?" This position seems untenable to the rational mind. Therefore, if reward and punishment can no longer be seen as the motivating factors that lead to obedience to the law and the fact that the law is the law is also not sufficient (few Jews in our communities will claim to be observant of *halakha* simply because it is Jewish law), then a modern understanding of the system is required for the general population of Jews. In our modern context, as we live with the blessings of freedom, independence, and democracy with personal desire and satisfaction, for the vast majority of people, being what motivate personal choice, it is critical for us to create positive arguments for the living of a life of *mitzvot* so that we may all find the value and beauty in this lifestyle.

It is common to hear individuals voice a need to find "spirituality" or a connection to something deeper within themselves or in the universe. Judaism is often described as being too ritualistic and programmed to satisfy this need. However, Judaism's main purpose is to facilitate an individual's connection to the divine, that being the motivation behind the creation of ritual in the first place. By looking at mitzvot one at a time, instead of as an overwhelming mass, which can be difficult to comprehend and digest, one has the opportunity to find ways to satisfy a spiritual desire or yearning. *Mitzvot* do not exist in order to make our lives more difficult. Rather, they exist in order to make the navigation of life more meaningful. It is true that the rituals and commandments can be challenging at times, but no one ever said that the achievement of a spiritual and meaningful life was going to be easy. It merely depends what lenses you wear when you examine the object; you can either see a life

of *mitzvot* for its difficulties or for its opportunities. A life of meaning is out there for the taking, we only need to reach out, grab, and work at it. If this is the approach that we take, then perhaps we will be more successful in growing communities with higher rates of observance and senses of spirituality. For, the bottom line in Judaism is that *halakha* is Jewish law; it is commanded to us by God, our community, and our history and we are obligated to continue to push ourselves to follow it in increasing degrees throughout our lives.

Shabbat Shalom!