

PARSHAH SUMMARY & COMMENTARY

Bechukotai

Leviticus 26:3-27:34

Torah Reading for Week of May 18-24, 2003

"If you walk in My statutes and keep My commandments and do them; I will give your rain in due season, the land shall yield its produce, and the trees of the field shall yield their fruit."

Thus opens this week's reading, Bechukotai ("in My statutes"), which goes on to enumerate the earthly blessings that will result when the people of Israel follow G-d's commandments:

Your threshing shall reach to the vintage, and the vintage shall reach to the sowing time; and you shall eat your bread to the full, and

dwell secure in your land.

I will give peace in the land; and you shall lie down, and none shall make you afraid. I will remove evil beasts out of the land, neither shall the sword pass through your land.

You shall chase your enemies, and they shall fall before you by the sword. Five of you shall pursue a hundred, and a hundred of you shall put ten thousand to flight...

For I will turn My face to you. I will make you fruitful and multiply you, and establish My covenant with you...

I will place My dwelling amongst you; and My soul shall not abhor you. I will walk among you; I will be your G-d, and you shall be My people.

I am the L-rd your G-d who brought you out from the land of Egypt, from being their

Commentary

IF YOU WALK IN MY STATUTES (LEVITICUS 26:3)

The word "if" is to be understood as a plea on the part of G-d: "If only you would follow My statutes..."

(Talmud, Avodah Zarah 5a)

IF YOU WALK IN MY STATUTES (LEVITICUS 26:3)

The word *chok* ("statute" or "decree"), which gives the Parshah of *Bechukotai* its name, literally means "engraved".

The Torah comes in two forms: written and engraved. On the last day of his life, Moses inscribed the Torah on parchment scrolls. But this written Torah was preceded by an engraved Torah: the Divine law was first given to us encapsulated in the Ten Commandments, which were etched by the hand of G-d in two tablets of stone.

When something is written, the substance of the letters that express it—the ink—remains a separate entity from the substance upon which they have been set—the parchment. On the other hand, letters engraved in stone are forged in it: the words are stone and the stone is words.

By the same token, there is an aspect of Torah that is "inked" on our soul: we understand it, our emotions are roused by it; it becomes our "lifestyle" or even our "personality"; but it remains something additional to ourselves. But there is a dimension of Torah that is *chok*, engraved in our being. There is a dimension of Torah which expresses a bond with G-d that is of the very essence of the Jewish soul.

(Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi)

A rabbi once offered the following analogy: "Every Jew is a letter in the Torah. But a letter may, at times, grow somewhat faded. It is our sacred duty

to mend these faded letters and make G-d's Torah whole again."

Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak of Lubavitch heard this, and objected: "No, the identity of the Jew cannot be compared to erasable ink on parchment. Every Jew is indeed a letter in G-d's Torah, but a letter carved in stone. At times, the dust and dirt may accumulate and distort—or even completely conceal—the letter's true form; but underneath it all, the letter remains whole. We need only sweep away the surface grime, and the letter, in all its perfection and beauty, will come to light."

IF YOU WALK IN MY STATUTES... I WILL GIVE YOUR RAIN IN DUE SEASON (26:3)

Rabbi Jacob said: There is no reward for the mitzvot in this world..

[What is the proof for this?] In connection with the mitzvah of honoring one's parents it is written, "In order that your days may be prolonged, and that it may go well with you" (Deuteronomy 5:16). In reference to the mitzvah of "dismissal of the nest" (to chase away the mother bird before taking the young) it is written, "That it may be well with you, and that you may prolong your days" (ibid. 22:7). Now, what if a person's father says to him, "Ascend to the loft and bring me young birds," and he ascends to the loft, dismisses the mother and takes the young, and on his return falls and is killed—where is this man's well-being and where is this man's long days? But "in order that it may be well with you" means on the day that is wholly good; and "in order that thy days may be long," on the day that is wholly long..

Perhaps such things don't happen? Rabbi Jacob saw an actual occurrence.

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slaves; I have broken the bars of your yoke, and made you walk upright.

The Rebuke

Then comes the *tochachah* ("rebuke" or "punishment")—a harshly detailed prediction of what will befall the people of Israel when they turn away from G-d::

But if you will not hearken to Me, and will not do all these commands; if you shall despise My statutes, if your soul shall abhor my laws, so that you will not do all My commandments,

and break My covenant.

I also will do this to you; I will appoint over you terror, consumption and fever, that shall consume the eyes, and cause sorrow of heart...

I will set My face against you, and you shall be slain before your enemies; they that hate you shall reign over you and you shall flee when none pursues you...

I will make your skies like iron, and your earth like brass: your strength shall be spent in vain, for your land shall not yield her produce, neither shall the trees of the land yield their fruit...

And so it goes—more than thirty verses filled with every catastrophe imaginable, predicting every calamity destined to befall our people in the course of our history because we "walk

Commentary

(Talmud, Kiddushin 39b)

Since we know that the reward for the mitzvot, and the good which we shall merit if we keep the way of G-d written in the Torah, is solely in the life of the World To Come... and the retribution exacted from the wicked who abandon the ways of righteousness written in the Torah is the cutting off [of the soul]... why does it say throughout the Torah, "If you obey, you will receive such and such; if you do not obey, it shall happen to you such and such"—things that are of the present world, such as plenty and hunger, war and peace, sovereignty and subjugation, inhabitation of the land and exile, success and failure, and the like?

All that is true, and did, and will, come to pass. When we fulfill all the commandments of the Torah, all the good things of this world will come to us; and when we transgress them, the evils mentioned in the Torah will happen to us. Nevertheless, those good things are not the ultimate reward of the mitzvot, nor are those evils the ultimate punishment for transgressing them. The explanation of the matter is thus: G-d gave us this Torah; it is a tree of life, and whoever observes all that is written in it and knows it with a complete knowledge merits thereby the life of the World To Come... Yet G-d also promised us in the Torah that if we observe it with joy... He will remove from us all things that may prevent us from fulfilling it, such as illness, war, hunger, and the like, and He will bestow upon us all blessings that bolster our hand to observe the Torah such as abundant food, peace, and much gold and silver, *in order that* we should not need to preoccupy ourselves all our days with our material needs but be free to learn the wisdom and observe the commandments by which we shall merit the life of the World To come.

(Mishneh Torah, Laws of Repentance 9:1)

Maimonides' concept of the "reward" for mitzvot in this world has a parallel in Torah law. The law states that farm workers must be allowed to eat of the food they are working with; even an animal may not be "muzzled as it

threshes." This is not payment for their work—their wages they receive later, after their work is done—but a special provision that says that they must be allowed to eat from the produce they are working with.

By the same token, we are employed by G-d to develop and elevate His world through the performing of mitzvot. The actual reward for our work will come later, in the World To Come, after our task is completed; but G-d is also "obligated" to allow us to enjoy the material blessings of this world, which is the object of our toil.

(The Lubavitcher Rebbe)

IF YOU WALK IN MY STATUTES... I WILL GIVE YOUR RAIN IN DUE SEASON (26:3)

Doubtless the religions of those times—as do the religions of our times—all promised rewards destined for the soul after its departure from the body, so as to distance the proof of their claims. Because they are not in possession of the truth, they cannot promise an immanent and tangible sign... But our Torah makes promises that can be confirmed in the here and now—something that no other teaching can do.

(Ran)

I WILL GIVE YOUR RAIN IN DUE SEASON (26:3)

At times when people do not usually go out, like the eve of Shabbat.

(Talmud; Rashi)

AND THE TREES OF THE FIELD SHALL YIELD THEIR FRUIT (26:3)

In the days of Moshiach, every species of trees will bear edible fruit.

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casually" with G-d:

I shall cast your carcasses upon the carcasses of your idols... I shall lay desolate your holy places...

And you I shall scatter amongst the nations... your land shall be desolate, your cities in ruins... And those who remain of you shall pine away in their iniquity in your enemies' lands...

And yet,

I will remember My covenant with Jacob. Also

Commentary

(Torat Kohanim; Rashi)

I WILL GIVE PEACE IN THE LAND (26:6)

There may be food, there may be drink, but if there is no peace, there is nothing.

(Rashi)

NEITHER SHALL THE SWORD PASS THROUGH YOUR LAND (26:6)

That there will not be war goes without saying; the sword will not even pass through your land on the way to another country.

(Torat Kohanim; Rashi)

FIVE OF YOU SHALL PURSUE A HUNDRED, AND A HUNDRED OF YOU SHALL PUT TEN THOUSAND TO FLIGHT (26:8)

But is this the right proportion? It should have stated only "and a hundred of you shall pursue two thousand." But the explanation is: a few who fulfill the commandments of the Torah cannot compare with the many who fulfill the commandments of the Torah.

(Torat Kohanim; Rashi)

I HAVE BROKEN THE BARS OF YOUR YOKE, AND MADE YOU WALK UPRIGHT (26:13)

My covenant with Isaac, also My covenant with Abraham will I remember; and I will remember the land....

Despite all, the people of Israel shall forever remain G-d's people:

Even when they are in the land of their enemies, I will not cast them away; nor will I ever abhor them, to destroy them and to break My covenant with them; for I am the L-rd their G-d.

Values and Appraisals

The second part of Bechukotai legislates the laws of *erachin* ("values" or "appraisals")—the manner by which to calculate the values of different types of pledges made to G-d.

If a person is pledged (i.e., a person declares "I pledge my value to G-d" or "I pledge this person's value"), the Torah sets a fixed sum,

An animal walks with its face to the earth, for earthiness and materiality is all that it knows. Man walks upright, for man was born to gaze upon and aspire to the Heavens.

(Rabbi DovBer of Mezerich)

BUT IF YOU WILL NOT HEARKEN TO ME... (26:14)

There are different opinions among the Kabbalists in regard to the rewards and punishments that the Torah predicts for the observance or non-observance of the mitzvot. Nachmanides is of the opinion that, "The rewards that befall a person for the doing of a mitzvah, or the punishments that come because of a transgression, come about only by supra-natural means. Were a person to be left to his nature and natural fate, the righteousness of his deeds would not give anything to him nor take anything from him. Rather, the Torah's rewards and punishments in this world are all miracles. They come hidden, for the one who observes them thinks them to have occurred by the normal conduct of the world; but they are in truth Divinely ordained rewards and punishments to the person."

Other Kabbalists, however, maintain that this is a natural process. In the words of the Shaloh: "The supernal worlds respond to the actions of the lower world, and from there the blessing spreads to those who caused it. To one who understands this truth, it is not a miracle, but the nature of the *avodah* (man's life's work to serve G-d)" In other words, punishment for wrongdoing is no more G-d's "revenge" than falling to the ground is Divine retribution for jumping out the window. Just as the Creator established certain laws of cause and effect that define the natural behavior of the physical universe, so, too, did He establish a spiritual-moral "nature," by which doing good results in a good and fulfilling life and doing evil results in negative and strife-filled experiences.

A third approach sees the suffering associated with sin as the by-product of

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based on the age and sex of the pledged person and ranging from 3 to 50 shekels, which is seen to represent that pledged person's monetary "value". This amount is given by the one who made the pledge to the treasury of the Holy Temple.

If a kosher animal is pledged to G-d, it is brought as an offering in the Holy Temple. "He shall not exchange it nor substitute

another for it, be it a good for a bad, or a bad for a good; and if he shall at all exchange beast for beast, then it and its substitute shall both be holy."

Other objects (such as a non-kosher animal or a house), are given to the Temple treasury to be sold, or else they are redeemed by their pledger for their assessed market value plus 20%.

A pledged field goes to the Temple treasury until the Jubilee year (see above), at which time it goes to the Kohen (priest). A person wishing to redeem his pledged field is not assessed according to the field's market value, but by the Torah's own criteria: 50 shekel per

Commentary

G-d's rehabilitation of the iniquitous soul. The analogy is the removal of an infective splinter from a person's body: the pain that is experienced is not a "punishment" as such for the person's carelessness, but an inevitable part of the healing process itself. The fact that a foreign body has become imbedded in living flesh and has caused its decay makes its removal a painful experience. By the same token, when something alien to the soul's bond with G-d has become imbedded within it, the extraction of this alien body, and the healing of the bond, is experienced as painful to both body and soul.

IF YOU WILL NOT HEarken TO ME, AND WALK CASUALLY WITH ME; I, TOO, WILL ACT CASUALLY WITH YOU... (26:28)

All sins derive from the sin of insignificance: when a person ceases to be sensitive to the paramount importance which G-d attaches to his life and deeds. "I don't really matter" is not humility—it is the ultimate arrogance. It really means: "I can do what I want."

The most terrible of punishments is for G-d to indulge the sinner this vanity. For G-d to say: "All right, have it your way; what happens to you is of no significance"; for G-d to act toward him as if He really does not care what happens to him.

(The Chassidic Masters)

I WILL PUNISH YOU, I TOO (26:28)

When a father punishes his child, the suffering he inflicts on himself is greater than anything experienced by the child. So it is with G-d: His pain is greater than our pain.

(Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov)

I WILL CAST YOUR CARCASSES UPON THE CARCASSES OF YOUR IDOLS (26:30)

It was told of Elijah the Righteous, that while searching for those who were languishing with hunger in Jerusalem, he once found a child faint with

hunger lying upon a dung heap.

"Of what family are you?" he asked him. "I belong to this-and-this family," the child replied. He asked: "Are any of that family left," and he answered, "None, excepting myself."

Thereupon he asked: "If I teach you something by which you will live, you will learn?" He replied, "Yes." "Then," said he, "recite every day: 'Hear O Israel, the L-rd is our G-d, the L-rd is one.'" But the child retorted: "Be silent, for one must not make mention of the name of G-d"—for so his father and mother had taught him—and straightway he brought forth an idol from his bosom, embracing and kissing it, until his stomach burst, his idol fell to the earth, and he upon it, thus fulfilling the verse, "And I shall cast your carcasses upon the carcasses of your idols."

(Talmud, Sanhedrin 63b)

I SHALL LAY DESOLATE YOUR HOLY PLACES (26:31)

Even in their desolation, they retain their holiness.

(Talmud, Megillah 28a)

I SHALL MAKE DESOLATE THE LAND; AND YOUR ENEMIES WHO DWELL IN IT SHALL BE ASTONISHED AT IT (26:32)

This is actually a blessing for Israel—that their enemies will derive no satisfaction from the land, for it shall remain desolate as long as the people of Israel are exiled from it.

(Rashi)

AND YOU I SHALL SCATTER AMONGST THE NATIONS (26:33)

G-d did a kindness to the people of Israel, that he scattered them amongst the nations. For if they were concentrated in one place, the heathens would make war on them; but since they are dispersed, they cannot be destroyed.

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beit chomer (an area equivalent to slightly less than four acres). This amount is to be deducted in accordance with how many years remain until the Jubilee year (e.g., if only 20 years remain until the Jubilee, than the value

per *beit chomer* is 20 shekels). The 20% addition also applies.

"These are the commandments," our Parshah concludes and closes the book of Leviticus, "which G-d commanded to Moses for the children of Israel on Mount Sinai."

Commentary

(Talmud Pesachim 87b; Midrash Lekach Tov)

AND YOU I SHALL SCATTER AMONGST THE NATIONS (26:33)

The people of Israel were exiled among the nations only in order that converts should be added to them.

(Talmud, *ibid.*)

The "converts" that the Talmud speaks of are the "sparks of holiness" contained within the material resources of the world, which are redeemed and elevated when we use these resources in our service of G-d.

(The Chassidic Masters)

EVEN WHEN THEY ARE IN THE LAND OF THEIR ENEMIES, I WILL NOT CAST THEM AWAY (26:44)

Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai said: Come and see how beloved are Israel in the sight of G-d, in that to every place to which they were exiled the *Shechinah* (Divine Presence) went with them. They were exiled to Egypt and the *Shechinah* was with them, as it says, "Did I reveal myself unto the house of your father when they were in Egypt?" (I Samuel 2:27). They were exiled to Babylon, and the *Shechinah* was with them, as it says, "For your sake I was sent to Babylon" (Isaiah 43:14). And when they will be redeemed in the future, the *Shechinah* will be with them, as it says, "Then the L-rd your G-d will return with your captivity" (Deuteronomy 30:3)

(Talmud, Megillah 29a)

Rabbi Isaac ben Samuel says in the name of Rav: The night has three watches, and at each watch the Holy One, blessed be He, sits and roars like a lion and says: Woe to the children, on account of whose sins I destroyed My house and burnt My temple and exiled them among the nations of the world... Woe to the father who has banished his children, and woe to the children who have been banished from the table of their father!

(Talmud, Berachot 3a)

HE SHALL NOT EXCHANGE IT NOR SUBSTITUTE ANOTHER FOR IT (27:33)

Every person was born to a mission in life that is distinctly, uniquely and exclusively their own. No one—not even the greatest of souls—can take his or her place. No person who ever lived or who ever will live can fulfill that particular aspect of G-d's purpose in creation in his stead.

(The Lubavitcher Rebbe)

This point is illustrated by a story told by the previous Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Schneersohn:

A wealthy businessman and his coachman arrived in a city one Friday afternoon. After the rich man was settled at the best hotel in town, the coachman went off to his humble lodgings.

Both washed and dressed for Shabbat and then set out for the synagogue for the evening prayers. On his way to *shul*, the businessman came across a wagon which had swerved off the road and was stuck in the ditch. Rushing to help a fellow in need, he climbed down into the ditch and began pushing and pulling at the wagon together with its hapless driver. But for all his good intentions, the businessman was hopelessly out of his depth. After struggling for an hour in the knee-deep mud, he succeeded only in ruining his best suit of Shabbat clothes and getting the wagon even more hopelessly imbedded in the mud. Finally, he dragged his bruised and aching body to the synagogue, arriving a scant minute before the start of Shabbat.

Meanwhile, the coachman arrived early to the synagogue and sat down to recite a few chapters of Psalms. At the synagogue he found a group of wandering paupers, and being blessed with a most generous nature, invited them *all* to share his meal. When the synagogue sexton approached the paupers to arrange meal placements the town's householders, as is customary in Jewish communities, he received the same reply from them all: "Thank you, but I have already been invited for the Shabbat meal."

Unfortunately, however, the coachman's means were unequal to his generous heart, and his dozen guests left his table with but a shadow of a meal in their hungry stomachs.

Thus the coachman, with his twenty years of experience in extracting wagons from mudholes, took it upon himself to feed a small army, while the wealthy businessman, whose Shabbat meal leftovers could easily have fed every hungry man within a ten mile radius, floundered about in a ditch.

"Every soul," said Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak in conclusion, "is entrusted with a mission unique to her alone, and is granted the specific aptitudes, talents and resources necessary to excel in her ordained role. One must take care not to become one of those 'lost souls' who wander through life trying their hand at every field of endeavor except for what is truly and inherently their own."

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From the Chassidic Masters

EATING ON THE JOB

The Torah reading of Bechukotai (Leviticus 26:3-2:34) opens with G-d's promise of material prosperity for those who adhere to His commandments. "If you walk in my statutes," the Parshah begins, "and keep My commandments and do them; I will give your rain in due season, the land shall yield its produce, and the trees of the field shall yield their fruit..." — and goes on to list the multiple blessing that will flow when we faithfully carry out the Divine plan for life on earth..

Many of the commentaries struggle to explain this emphasis on material reward for the observance of the mitzvot. Did not our sages (in *Ethics of the Fathers* 1:3) state the ideal, "Do not be as servants who serve their master for the sake of receiving a reward; but rather be as servants who serve their master not for the sake of receiving a reward"? Are we not enjoined, as Maimonides puts it, to "do the truth because it is true"? And if the Torah does have its reasons to promise to reward a righteous life, why does it speak of material rewards, awarded in our physical lifetimes upon earth? Wouldn't spiritual blessings, awarded to the soul after it is freed from the confines and limitations of the body, more aptly reciprocate a G-dly life? Indeed, the Talmud states so in so many words: "Today (i.e., in this world) — to do them (the mitzvot); Tomorrow (i.e., in the World To Come) — to receive reward." The Talmud cites one authority who categorically states: "There is no reward for mitzvot in this world" (Talmud, Eruvin 22a, derived from Deuteronomy 7:11).

As we said, numerous commentaries and scholars discuss this contradiction, seeking to reconcile the Torah's promises in Bechukotai (and other places) with the principles cited above, which are also rooted in Torah. In one of his talks, the Lubavitcher Rebbe approaches the issue from an interesting angle — the legal angle. Using Torah law as our criterion, what would G-d's obligations toward us be when we fulfill the tasks He demands of us? Is there any *legal* basis to our petitions to G-d in our daily prayers for material life, health and sustenance?

(For although G-d invented these laws, He too, by choice, is bound by them. In the words of the Midrash (Shemot Rabbah 30:6): "G-d's way is not like the way of flesh and blood. The way of flesh and blood is that he instructs others to do, but does not do himself; G-d, however, what He Himself does, that is what He tells Israel to do and observe.")

To define G-d's legal obligations to us, we first need to define our legal relationship with Him. There are, in fact, three models for this relationship: the slave, the employee, and the partner.

Which of these models our individual life fits into is entirely up to us. The Talmud (Megillah 12b) states: "In the manner in which man measures himself, so is meted out to him." As we have elaborated in an [earlier essay](#), G-d leaves it to us to define our vision of life and our relationship with Him, and then relates to us accordingly. So it is up to us whether to perceive — and thus define — the labor of life via the mentality of the "slave", the attitude of the "employee", or the perspective of the "partner".

Some apt to see themselves as slaves of an autocratic master. I didn't ask to be born — goes this line of thinking — nor was I consulted when the laws of life were formulated. All this was imposed on me. As the *Ethics* puts it, "Against your will you are born, and against your will you die." My master is all-powerful, so I had best carry out His commands.

Others adopt the less apathetic attitude of the employee. I have a job to do, is their approach, and I'll give it my best effort. And has G-d not promised to reward my toil? True, our sages have established that "There is no reward for mitzvot in this world"; but certainly the eventual rewards of the World To Come will more than compensate for my present-day labors.

This vision of life — life as a job — is expressed by the talmudic sage Rabbi Tarfon in the closing words of the second chapter of *Ethics of the Fathers*:

The day is short, the work is much, the workers are lazy, the reward is great and the Master is pressing... It is not incumbent upon you to finish the task, but neither are you free to absolve yourself from it. If you have learned much Torah, you will be greatly rewarded, and your Employer is trustworthy to pay you the reward of your labors. Know, that the reward of the righteous is in the World to Come.

Finally, there are those who experience life as a partnership. They, too, are "slaves" in the sense that

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they acknowledge G-d's absolute mastery over their lives; they, too are "employees" in the sense that He has defined their life's assignment and has promised to reward us for their labor. But they also believe that man has been granted the ability to elevate life into a *partnership* with G-d. As G-d's partners, they develop their selves and their world in accordance with the Divine will not only because they must, nor merely to "do their job," but as an intensely personal enterprise. Life is their joint venture with G-d — a venture conceived and enabled by Him, but fueled by their own initiative and ambition.

The Initial Verdict

So what does Torah law legislate in regard to these three models of the G-d-man relationship?

At first glance, it would seem that however we define our relationship with G-d, our life's toil on His behalf does not obligate Him toward us in any way, at least not regarding our material needs and wants.

If we are His slaves, G-d already owns the product of our toil. On the other extreme, if we are His partners, we are laboring for ourselves as well as for Him: for the "partner" — to again quote the *Ethics* — "The reward of a mitzvah is the mitzvah itself." When the perfect world that is the aim of G-d and man's "joint venture" is complete, this will itself yield the ultimate spiritual *and* material reward for man. "At that time," writes Maimonides in the closing words of his *Mishneh Torah*, "there will be no hunger or war, no jealousy or rivalry. For the good will be plentiful, and all delicacies available as dust... 'For the world shall be filled with the knowledge of G-d as the waters submerge the sea' (Isaiah 11:9)."

The only one who might seem to have any legal claim is the "employee." Indeed, the Torah commands an employer, "Do not delay the wages of your employee overnight" (Leviticus 19:13). But this law applies only to a day-laborer, not to one who is hired for a longer period or to accomplish a specific task. In such cases, the law is that "wages must be paid only at the conclusion of the employment" (Talmud, Eruvin 22a). So when G-d tells us, "Today, is the time to do; tomorrow, to receive reward," this is fully in keeping with

the laws He instituted to govern the employer-employee relationship: He owes us our wages only upon the completion of the collective task for which He has "hired" us.

Get a Better Lawyer

This is what a cursory look at the law yields. But a more thorough examination reveals a series of laws that G-d commanded in His Torah which would obligate Him to provide us with our daily needs in all three cases — whether we define our duties toward Him as those of the slave, the employee or the partner.

The slave: "A master is obligated to make his Hebrew slave or Hebrew maid equal to himself in food, drink, clothing and dwelling. This is derived from the verse 'for it is beneficial to him *together with you*' (Deuteronomy 15:16.) — i.e., you cannot eat fine bread and feed him coarse bread; drink aged wine and have him drink new wine; sleep on soft fibers and have him sleep on straw... Thus it has been said: one who acquires a Hebrew slave, acquires himself a master..." (Mishneh Torah, *Laws of Slaves* 1:9; Talmud, Kiddushin 20a.)

The employee: In Deuteronomy 23:24-25 we read: "When you enter your fellow's vineyard (as an employee), you may eat your fill of grapes, at your desire... When you enter the standing crop of your fellow, you may pluck grain with your hands..." These verses are interpreted by the our sages to mean: "Workers who are employed in processing produce of the earth that has not yet reached its final desired state... the employer is commanded to allow them to eat from the produce they are working with." This is quite apart from the wages owed to the employee upon completion of the term of his employment. This law applies to work-animals as well; as the Torah (Deuteronomy 25:4) commands, "Do not muzzle an ox while it is threshing." (Rashi on verse; Mishneh Torah, *Laws of Hire* 12:1.)

The partner: A law dealing with a partnership that parallels our own joint endeavor with the Almighty, reads: "If a person gives eggs to a chicken-farmer so that he seat his chickens on them until they hatch and raise the chicks, with the understanding that the profit is to be divided between them, he is obligated to also pay him his labor and feeding costs" (Mishneh Torah, *Laws of Agents and Partners* 8:1; Talmud, Bava Metzia 68b. To have the chicken-farmer hatch the eggs and raise the chicks solely for the promise of profit would be a violation of the prohibition against usury — see Rashi on Talmud, *ibid.*). So when G-d gives us

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a world to develop and perfect as a “profit-sharing” venture, Torah law mandates that He also provide us with the daily expenses our work entails.

This is the basis for Maimonides explanation of the material, this-worldly rewards promised by the Torah when the people of Israel fulfill the commandments of the Torah (Mishneh Torah, *Laws of Repentance* 9:1):

Since we know that the reward for the mitzvot is... the life of the World To Come... why does it say throughout the Torah, “If you obey, you will receive such and such; if you do not obey, it shall happen to you such and such” — all this, things that are of the present world, such as plenty and hunger, war and peace, sovereignty and subjugation, inhabitancy of the land and exile, success and failure, etc.? ... The explanation of this [apparent contradiction] is: G-d gave us this Torah, it is a tree of life, and whoever observes all that is written in it and knows it with a complete knowledge merits thereby the life of the World To come... Yet G-d also promised us in the Torah that if we observe it with joy... He will remove from us all things that may prevent us from fulfilling it, such as illness, war, hunger, etc., and He will bestow upon us all blessings that bolster our hand to observe the Torah such as abundant food, peace, and much gold and silver, so that we need not preoccupy ourselves all our days with our material needs but be free to lean the wisdom and observe the commandments by which we shall merit the life of the World To come...

So when we approach G-d in prayer — concludes the Rebbe — we can do so with the confidence that no matter what level we have attained in identifying with our life’s mission — whether we have achieved the commitment of a partner, or only the responsibility of an employee, or merely the resignation of a slave or beast-of-burden — He will surely heed our requests and bless us with a health, sustenance and tranquility.

*Based on the teachings of the Lubavitcher Rebbe
www.therebbe.org; adapted by Yanki Tauber, editor@chabadonline.com*

THE EVOLUTION OF EVIL

“All affairs of this world are severe and evil and wicked men prevail...” (Tanya ch. 6).

No one who is even minimally acquainted with world history, and marginally aware of current events, is likely to take issue with this assertion by Chassidic master Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi. Its stark accuracy underlies one of the most disturbing questions in the annals of religious thought. Why should, and how could, the world be this way? The cruelty, violence and pain that permeate earthly life present no difficulty at all for atheists, nihilists, or pagans. Anyone else, however, must square such a world with a loving, merciful, just, all-wise Creator.

This most distressing and demanding challenge to religious faith is constantly nurtured by a seemingly endless progression of individual suffering and horrendous historical upheavals. It is the subject of an entire book of scripture, Job, and, more recently, it has been assigned its own special title, Theodicy, reflecting its pivotal status in modern religious philosophy.

For most of us, however, this classic quandary usually assumes a somewhat more prosaic form. Why do bad things happen to good people? Where was G-d during the crusades, the holocaust, the Hebron pogrom, etc. ? How could G-d allow the black plague to happen? How can G-d tolerate, much less sustain, the likes of Hitler, Stalin or Arafat?

There are no answers to these questions, and misguided attempts at explaining them away invariably result in embarrassed retreats, waffling, and covering oneself with obvious platitudes regarding G-d’s inscrutability. The subject is simply beyond us, and the questions are best left alone.

Chassidic teaching, however, does not leave them alone. Since the Torah is the foundation of all of existence, its inner facet, Chassidism, has the power to reveal G-dly purpose and grace within life’s harshest realities. There are indeed no ultimate “answers”. Chassidism, however, does not offer answers, but rather insights that recast the questions in a broader, more sophisticated context, and that reveal layers of meaning in life’s long chain of seemingly random insults.

Brilliant Darkness

The question of earthly afflictions encompasses two dimensions; 1) the source and root of suffering, and 2) the form that suffering actually assumes in mundane life.

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We can acquire insight into the first of these by examining the first blessing that introduces the morning recital of the *Shemah*. The prayer blesses G-d who "...forms light and creates darkness, who makes peace and creates all things." The Hebrew word used here for "forms" is *yotzer* and that for "creates" is *borei*. These two verbs allude to two specific stages, or spiritual worlds, in the chain of cause and effect that extends downward from the essence of Divinity to culminate in the physical universe in which we live.

The verb *borei* refers to the world of *Briah* (creation) whereas *yotzer* denotes the world of *Yetzirah* (formation). The world of *Briah* is "higher" than that of *Yetzirah*, which is to say that it precedes *Yetzirah* in the sequential process of Divine emanation and is thus closer to the Divine source, the *Or Ein Sof*, or "infinite light". Furthermore, in the descent from *Briah* to *Yetzirah*, the Divine creative force or "light" is condensed, restricted, and obscured, such that the light, or "soul" of *Yetzirah* is only a dim reflection of that of *Briah*.

Briah is thus a lofty world of dazzling illumination compared to which lowly *Yetzirah* is relatively nondescript. Why then, in the above blessing, is *Yetzirah* characterized by light whereas *Briah* is associated with darkness?

The question is best addressed through an analogy. Newly-minted academics often fall into a classic trap when they first begin to teach. They are determined to deliver lectures of such brilliance, profundity, and eloquence that they will merit the adulation of their students, the admiration and recognition of their Chair, and the humble awe of their older colleagues. The outcome, of course is inevitably something else. They are indeed so brilliant, profound and eloquent that nobody can understand them, and they end up talking to themselves. The lectures are too deep and too densely packed with difficult material and advanced concepts. In short, the light is too abundant and too intense. Had the lecturer spoken in Swahili or remained silent altogether, it would have been all the same to the students, since they grasped nothing in any case. Thus, although there has truly been a great revelation of light, from the students' viewpoint, there is nothing but darkness.

Similarly, the light of *Briah* is so intense that it exceeds the capacities (the "vessels" in Kabbalist-Chassidic terminology) of the lower realms to receive it and is, therefore, perceived as an absence of light which is to say, darkness. In the transition from *Briah* to *Yetzirah*, however, the light is reduced and veiled to the extent that it can be captured by the diminutive vessels of *Yetzirah* and thus recognized and appreciated as illumination.

The inference to be drawn from this is that life's events that are rooted in the highest levels of Divine beneficence necessarily transcend the capabilities of the created intellect, and are thus, most often, interpreted as an absence of good. Revealed good of a far lesser order, however, is enthusiastically embraced and mistakenly valued as the ultimate expression of Divine kindness.

Light and Vessels

Consider a parent who slaps the wrist of an eight-month-old child about to insert his finger in an electric socket. The slap is a form of communication. The parent wishes to convey to the child information essential to its very life, namely that the socket is charged with electricity of sufficient voltage to kill him should he succeed in inserting his finger. The problem is that this information or "light" infinitely transcends the intellectual capacities of the child. Eight-month-old children are incapable of relating to such advanced concepts as electricity, voltage, or death.

In the case of an adult the conceptual "light"—i.e., the information that a potential deadly electric shock awaits anyone who sticks his finger in a socket—is grasped, internalized, and appreciated by the intellect. This assimilation of the light within the intellectual "vessels" of the mind elicits an appropriate emotional response, alarm, which in turn evokes a determination to act. The end result is that the finger is withdrawn from the source of danger, and it is to this end that the entire process was initiated. The mind of the child, however, can not absorb the "light", so that the communication necessary to remove him from harm must bypass his insufficient intellectual and emotional faculties and simply activate a withdrawal from the socket. Although, in this regard, the slap is most effective, the "skipped steps" result in an unbridgeable gap between the slap and the light that motivated it. Hence, despite the fact that the slap is literally a gift of life that originates in the highest level of parental love, the child experiences only the absence of light and interprets the slap as random, meaningless, suffering.

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These and similar analogies help us to appreciate that the mundane afflictions, which we necessarily experience as evil and harsh, are, in fact, rooted in the most sublime level of Divine wisdom and love.

However, while this line of inquiry sheds some light on the origin of earthly anguish, it does not address the enormous disparity between the lofty G-dly source of suffering and the dreadful, appalling forms that it assumes in this world. In the analogy above, for example, it is the parent him/herself who administers the slap to the child. Despite the inexplicable suffering, the child knows intuitively that the slap, delivered by his loving parent, does not express alienation or hostility; indeed, the parent comforts the child and wipes away the tears. In our case, however, it is nigh on impossible to discern the hand of our loving Father in the strikes that we receive through the agency of such vile, satanic creatures as Stalin, Hitler, etc. The forces and circumstances that afflict us seem to have a life of their own.

Chessed and Gevurah

The source of all mundane tribulations is the Divine attribute of *Gevurah*.

Gevurah, translated as strength, justice, or severity, is one of the ten *sefirot* (attributes or faculties) through which the Almighty interacts with creation. As a particular expression of G-dliness, *Gevurah* represents perfect goodness just as do the other *sefirot*, such as Wisdom, Kindness, and Mercy. Contrary to our intuition, *Gevurah* is as much an expression of G-d's love as is *Chessed* ("kindness"). Indeed, it is *Gevurah* that complements and perfects *Chessed*.

However, as manifestations of *Gevurah* extend downward through successively lower levels of creation, they assume the properties of the worlds through which they descend, and thus become progressively distorted and coarsened. Ultimately, the influence of the Divine attribute of *Gevurah* is invested within, and gives rise to the what the Kabbalists call *gevurot kashot*—"harsh severities"—a medium in which Divinity is concealed so deeply as to be completely unrecognizable. The cruel evils of this world, therefore, seem totally detached from any vestige of G-dly purpose, and they appear to exist, and to

function independently.

This apparent dissociation of worldly afflictions from their supernal source can be appreciated, to some extent, by means of an analogy. Consider a Rabbinic court of wise and compassionate judges before whom stands an individual guilty of some heinous offense. The judges understand that in order to rectify the sin and to restore the spiritual integrity of the sinner's soul, lashes are required.

The judges abhor inflicting pain on anyone. Moreover, being extremely wise and learned, they could undoubtedly find a technicality on which to base an acquittal, thus saving the sinner from physical punishment and themselves from the anguish of causing physical suffering to another human. The judges realize, however, that a man's spiritual life is at stake, and their love and compassion motivate them to disregard their own feelings and to save the sinning soul before them by ordering lashes.

Thus far there is only love, compassion and understanding. It is not, however, the judges, but rather a court-appointed official who carries out the sentence. This official was not privy to the judges' deliberations, and he knows nothing of the love, compassion and understanding which is the source and cause of the punishment. His job is to administer lashes and he is only interested in the technical performance of his job. At this stage of the procedure, the judges are no longer a reality. The power and authority to dispense lashes, once the process has been initiated, falls to the official, who neither knows nor cares why he has been ordered to lash this particular individual.

In truth, however, the love and wisdom of the judges underlies the entire exercise. However, the traits that qualify men as judges render them uniquely unsuitable to administer lashes. Indeed, for the lashes to be effective and to thus achieve the desired result, namely the cleansing of a soul, they must be given by someone unimpeded by the refined sensibilities and the empathetic nature required to be a judge. Thus the ideal deputy through whom judges' prescription can be implemented is someone very different from the judges themselves.

Similarly, the Divine attribute of *Gevurah*, which is a particular manifestation of G-d's love and concern, of necessity appears removed from the very afflictions that it engenders. Were the hand of G-d perceivable in each of our travails, the authenticity of the ordeal would dissipate and our free will would be compromised, thus precluding the fierce inner struggle

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required for our intended spiritual rectification and growth. In short, there could be no transforming spiritual crisis and subsequently, no redemptive possibilities within the experience.

Thus, the earthly agents of suffering serve the crucial purpose of concealing the Divine compassion at the core of the tribulations. In reality, however, they are nothing more than instruments of Divine will, and they have no independent authority or autonomous existence.

Body and Soul

This is all very fine. There remains, however, one serious problem. In the analogies presented above, the subjects survive and benefit from their suffering. The child, saved from electrocution, can now safely grow up to lead a productive life. The erstwhile transgressor, relieved of the burden of sin, is transformed into an upstanding, valuable member of society.

But what about those who do not survive the cure? How can Jews killed by Hitler, Arafat or the black plague possibly profit from the experience?

The answer is quite simple: The premise on which the question is based is incorrect. No Jews died, nor ever will die. The G-dly soul, which is the reality of a Jew, is immortal. Only the soul's body, which is to say, the Jew's circumstances, are subject to change.

The soul is capable of existing on a myriad of levels (this world, the Lower Garden of Eden, the Higher Garden of Eden, etc.). However, the soul itself, as an extension of pure G-dliness, is eternal and immutable. As far as the soul is concerned, the changing circumstances signify progressively loftier manifestations of its own essence.

Furthermore, a Jew's departure from this world is only temporary. The culmination of the soul's quest for ultimate self-realization is *Techiat Hameitim*, the resurrection of the dead. Thus "death" is simply one of the many varieties of ephemeral mundane afflictions that a soul experiences in order to achieve elevation, perfection, and ultimate joy.

This is already abundantly apparent to those Jews who are, at present, unencumbered by a body. Although those of us currently residing in the physical world may have to wrestle with the problem of mun-

dane suffering, souls see that no evil descends from on high. May the time soon arrive when this great truth is self-evident.

By Professor Yakov Brawer, brawer@med.mcgill.ca

THE PRODIGY UNDER THE BED

Rabbi Hillel of Paritch (1795-1864) was one of the many scholars of his day to join the Chabad Chassidic movement. For many years, he was a devoted disciple of the second and third rebbes of Chabad, Rabbi DovBer and Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Lubavitch.

As a young man, Rabbi Hillel heard of the founder of Chabad Chassidism, Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi and sought to meet with him. But the opportunity seemed to forever elude the young prodigy: no sooner did he arrive in a town that Rabbi Schneur Zalman was visiting, that he was informed that the Rebbe had just left. Finally, he managed to locate Rabbi Schneur Zalman's lodgings *before* the Rebbe was due to arrive. In order to ensure that he would not, once again, somehow miss his opportunity, Rabbi Hillel crept into Rabbi Schneur Zalman's appointed room and hid under the bed, determined, at last, to make the acquaintance of the great Rebbe.

In anticipation of his encounter with Rabbi Schneur Zalman, Rabbi Hillel had "armed" himself with some of his achievements in Talmudic study. At that time, the young scholar was studying the tractate *Erachin*, or "Appraisals", the section of the Talmud which deals with the laws of how to appraise the value of one's pledges to charity. Rabbi Hillel had a scholarly question on the subject which he had diligently rehearsed in order to discuss it with the Rebbe.

From his hiding place, Rabbi Hillel heard the Rebbe enter the room. But before he could make a move, he heard Rabbi Schneur Zalman exclaim: "If a young man has a question regarding 'Appraisals', he had best first evaluate himself."

The prodigy under the bed fainted on the spot. When he came to, Rabbi Schneur Zalman was gone...

The Lubavitcher Rebbe told this story, and then asked: How are we to apply this story to our lives?

The tractate of "Appraisals" discusses the laws presented in chapter 27 of Leviticus: if a person pledges to give to charity, but instead of citing a sum he says "I promise to give the value of this individual," we are

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to follow a fixed rate table set by the Torah, in which each age and gender group is assigned a certain “value”.

But why employ a flat rate which lumps together so many diverse individuals? Should not an accomplished scholar be considered more valuable than a simple laborer? The Torah states that we all stand equally before G-d, “from your heads, the leaders of your tribes, your elders... to your wood choppers and water carriers.” But can a person truly view his fellow as his equal when he is so obviously superior to him in talent and achievement?

This is the meaning of Rabbi Schneur Zalman’s remark to Rabbi Hillel: If you have a question regarding “Appraisals”, if you find it difficult to relate to the Torah’s evaluation of human worth, you had best take a long hard look at yourself. An honest examination of your own character and behavior will show how much you can learn from every man, how much there is for you to emulate in those who are supposedly “inferior” to yourself.

*Based on the teachings of the
Lubavitcher Rebbe www.therebbe.org;
adapted by Yanki Tauber, editor@chabadonline.com*

MEANING AND CHAOS

What is the relationship between goodness, kindness, selflessness — and material success? Does goodness lead to health and prosperity? This question, at the heart of mankind’s search for meaning, is frequently discussed in Jewish teachings.

Our Parshah presents us with a firm statement on this subject: “If you walk in My statutes, I will provide you with rain at the right time and the land will bear its crops and the trees will provide fruit... You will live securely in the land... But if you do not listen to Me and do not keep these laws... You will plant your crops in vain, because your enemies will eat them... you will flee even when no-one is chasing you...”

In a few brush strokes, so to speak, these passages outline two pictures: one of “Redemption”, i.e., national and individual wholeness, the other of *Galut*

(“Exile” - fragmentation and conflict.

The first picture, that of Redemption, depicts a state of union between the spiritual and physical aspects of life. A good action produces a good effect in the material world. Body and soul are in harmony on every level of being. The people serve G-d, and therefore the crops grow and there is peace. Life has meaning.

The second picture, that of Galut, comes as a punishment. Yet the state of Galut is not simply punishment and suffering, but *chaos*. Galut is the separation of spirit from matter.

In the situation of Galut the goodness of the individual, or of the community, may well not be rewarded in immediate material terms. Sometimes the crops will grow, sometimes not. Even if they do grow, sometimes the enemy will capture them. There is constant uncertainty. Galut is a dislocation between matter and spirit, body and soul. Good people might be stricken with horrifying disease and pain; the wicked often seem to enjoy peace and prosperity.

On a deeper level, even in the state of Galut there is a relationship between one’s actions and the events which follow. Yet it is governed by an infinite Divine logic not completely accessible to our minds. To understand it we would have to be able to take into account spiritual realms, the world of souls. We would have to be able to appreciate certain processes in existence which have to unfold. If the full spiritual panorama were accessible to us, we would indeed see precise reward for each individual action. But this is not apparent in the physical world which we see before our eyes.

Yet the fact that we know that there is a deeper reality is itself a step forward. Although we are living in the world of Galut so harshly depicted in the “Rebuke” in Parshah of Bechukotai, a world in which the Holocaust could take place, we can be conscious that waiting beyond the shadows is another way to live, the world of Redemption. And in the closing verses of the “Rebuke” the Torah promises that Redemption is the state we should be in, and the one to which we will return.

Hence we should do what we can to help our practical daily world attain that state in which soul and body, spirit and matter, G-d and existence are one, unified. Every step in observance of Torah brings that realm of Redemption closer.