

This Land is My Land

A Breslov Perspective on the Holy Land

Essay #21—Parshat Ki Tavo (5) 5761

"With Liberty and Justice for All"

So sayeth the Pledge of Allegiance of a famous world power which guarantees it on paper, but not in reality (except to the criminal and the criminally minded.) But, to be fair, the notion is a good one, for it is one that God actually placed into the world when He created it. Man was created to be a free thinker, to use his mind and intelligence to build and make the world an even better place for himself and for others. He was given liberty — freedom of choice. Free will. Can you imagine? God created the world and everything in it. He is Omnipotent. He can do what He wants. And He created man with the power to go up against Him! Every state has guidelines how to live and woe to the one who crosses the line. If the state had the power, they would never allow you to cross the line, but they don't have the power to do so. God does have the power, but He doesn't stop you. So, God created the very first democracy — "With liberty for all."

Still, in case people would get too giddy or arrogant and decide that they can do whatever they want, whenever they want, no matter what effect it as upon others or upon the world, God also created a system of Justice. Stay on the right side of the line, you can do what you want. Thinking about crossing line? Be careful. Beware. Why? Because aside from liberty and free choice, God also made "Justice for all." And the important thing to know is that He has the ability to deliver that justice, whether it is reward for doing right, or "payment" for doing what wasn't quite right. Here are some statements from our Sages about reward and punishment.

1. God's system of justice is to reward or punish commensurate with one's deeds. In Hebrew this is called *midah k'neged midah* ("measure for measure") (*Sotah* 8b, 9b).
2. The measure of good used in rewarding a person is at least 500 times greater than the measure of punishment (*Rashi, Exodus* 20:6).
3. God never withholds reward from any person (or animal!; *Pesachim* 118a). No matter who, no matter what, no matter when, why or how, the do-gooder will receive a reward. For example, this would even include - irony of ironies - concentration camp guards who would occasionally show the merest drop of kindness to the inmates, only to brutally terrorize them minutes later. Their reward is commensurate with their measure of kindness, a drop of the "good life" that they experienced as a "master race" for a few moments, while their punishment for their inhuman behavior is also repaid in beyond human payments — an eternal oven in Gehennom. Very scary indeed.
4. God never dispatches a nation until its measure is filled (*Sotah* 9a). Thus, even though a nation might be so evil as to make us all wonder how God allows it to continue, it will not be "dispatched" from the world until it has filled its entire measure of evil and thereby merit its total punishment and destruction. Testimony thereof is seen in the

fall of the ancient empires of Babylon, Persia, Greece and Rome; the Spanish Empire, and even the British Empire (upon which the sun never set, now hardly even rises). All rose to great heights and became world powers, yet are either no longer on the map or have been drastically diminished.

5. There is reward for good deeds both in this world and in the World to Come. There is punishment for evil deeds both in this world and in the Next World. The types of reward and punishment depend upon the temporal nature of the payment vis-a-vis an eternal nature of the reward or punishment.
6. God's system of punishment is not meant solely as punishment. Rather, in nearly all cases, His punishment is meant to "cleans" the soul from its impurities in order that it merit eternal reward, in the World to Come. Thus, it is important to remember that all suffering in this world can help to forgive one's sins and to cleanse the soul. In this sense, think of Gehennom as the "rinse cycle" of your soul's washing machine. For after you've been punished, your soul is cleansed and you can enter Gan Eden, Paradise, with a clean soul (although it must be pointed out that there are some who descend into Gehennom for eternal punishment). It is also important to remember that souls can also be reincarnated. Even though reincarnation is a punishment — having to be born again, live one's life with all its trials and tribulations — it has positive aspects too. It is a means of giving a person another chance to improve his life and earn eternal reward.
7. In summation: Not one single deed goes unobserved. No good deed goes unrewarded. No evil deed goes unpunished. God's Justice is exactly exact!

Let's explore the Rebbe's Lesson quoted in the previous essay. Rebbe Nachman addresses the complex issue of God's justice. Why is it that the wicked not only go seemingly unpunished for their wickedness, but God actually allows them to carry on with their lives, sometimes with astonishing success? Where is the justice in the world?! Why are the wicked spared and even blessed with prosperity, while so many good people suffer? Even Moshe Rabbeinu found the issue of theodicy difficult to comprehend. "Why is it," he asked God, "that some righteous people have it good, while others suffer? Why is it that some wicked people have it good, while others suffer?" The answer, says the Talmud, can be found in the differences between the completely righteous and the partially righteous, and between the completely wicked and the partially wicked (*Berakhot 7a*). The following explanation has been culled from the commentaries on this passage:

The Torah states that by performing God's commandments, we will be rewarded with blessing in this world and with everlasting life in the World to Come, whereas if we fail to observe the mitzvot, punishment will be meted out both in this world and the next. What then of the good person who commits a sin, or a number of sins, or has on some occasion caused harm, humiliation or suffering to another person? Is he held accountable for his actions? And what of the wicked person who does a mitzvah, or a number of mitzvot? Is he rewarded for his deeds?

The answer is that God rewards each good deed and punishes for each wrongful deed, taking into account all relevant factors, including a person's intent, capabilities, etc. God's exacting of justice is thus precise, with each person receiving reward or punishment commensurate with his actions. However, so as to enable good people to be rewarded with eternal life, God punishes them in this world for their few sins; conversely, so as to discharge any claim the wicked may have to the World to Come, God rewards

them in this world for their few good deeds. The good fortune of the wicked in this temporal world is thus at the expense of any reward due them in the Future. Although, because man's life span is short, it sometimes seems that their reward is great, in fact their reward is of limited duration. Afterwards they must endure the punishment of Gehennom.

By the same token, the suffering that befalls good people is also of limited duration, only while they sojourn in this world. Eternal reward awaits them in the World to Come. Thus, that which appears to be punishment may, in the light of deeper introspection, prove to a blessing; that which appears to be blessing may, in the light of deeper introspection, prove to be a curse.

A further aspect of reward and punishment, the one Rebbe Nachman addressed in our lesson, is the delay we often perceive in the execution of the reward, or in the enactment of the punishment. How is it that the wicked ascend to a position where they can cause extended harm to others, yet it takes so long before they suffer their downfall? Why, in fact, are the wicked allowed to be in a position to cause harm to the righteous in the first place? (The wicked Haman, for example, reached such a powerful position that he was able to decree the destruction of the Jewish people. Yasir Arafat, a mass murderer, lives as a head of state oppressing his people day in day out, as well as causing so much suffering to the Israelis. Saddam Hussein, Hitler, Stalin etc. are all examples of tyrants who got away with murder.) In expounding upon the concept of Divine justice, the Rebbe explains why despite their evil deeds the wicked live with apparent blessing from God and can, at times, even overpower the righteous. At the same time, he shows that God's measure of justice is exact, and that the suffering of the righteous has purpose and meaning.

The complexity of God's justice is illustrated in the *Chad Gadya* ("One Kid") song from the Pesach Haggadah. It is about a young goat eaten by a cat which was then bitten by a dog. The dog was struck by a stick, which was burnt by a fire. The fire was doused by water, which was drunk by an ox. The ox was slaughtered by a slaughterer, who was slain by the Angel of Death, who was in turn slain by none other than God Himself. Reb Noson explains that, unquestionably, the cat deserved punishment for eating the goat. As a result, the dog bit the cat. But it was not the dog's place to mete out punishment. Therefore, it too was punished, being beaten by a stick. But the stick, too, had no right to intervene...and so on. The upshot of the song is that the ultimate justice comes only when God Himself metes out punishment. We are not privy to His thoughts of what constitutes true justice, nor can we understand them in the present. The true revelation of God's justice will take place only after the arrival of the Mashiach. Until then, we must strengthen our faith in God that He is a just Judge and that Divine justice is administered for each and every deed (*Likutey Halakhot, Rosh Chodesh 6:19*).

So, for the moment, we have the idea that justice must be served and each person rewarded or punished commensurate with his deeds. In the next essay, we hope to tie this idea together with the Holy Land and what is taking place there today, and perhaps most importantly, how it applies to us and what we can do about it.

Copyright © 2001, Breslov Research Institute

- [Home](#)
- [This Land is My Land Table of Contents](#)
- [Essay #20](#)
- [Essay #22](#)