

Shabbat Shalom Fax

Parshat Bechukotai

Tel: 815-301-1928

Fax: 815-301-1928

Email: shabbatshalomfax@gmail.com

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27 Iyar, 5782

The Fax of Life

ד"ס

May 28, 2022

GOOD MORNING! This past week would have been the 72nd birthday of our beloved friend, mentor, and teacher Rabbi Kalman Packouz, of blessed memory. So I began to think of him, as I often do, and I was reminded of something that used to bother him to no end.

He absolutely HATED the expression “no good deed goes unpunished.” As I have mentioned countless times in prior columns, Rabbi Packouz lived in a very God centered universe. God was an immanent and ever present element in his life, so it was only natural that he would find the implied injustice of God’s providence to be absolutely abhorrent. In his mind, “no good deed goes unpunished” was a repudiation of everything he believed. Of course, this reminds me of a joke.

Bob dies and goes to heaven. He is met at the pearly gates by the angel overseeing all the admissions into heaven. The angel looks at him and starts flipping through the book in front of him. “Bob,” begins the angel, “we have a problem. As far as I can see, you have exactly fifty percent good deeds and fifty percent sins. I can’t let you into heaven on that basis. Are there any good deeds in your life that I may have missed that would tip the scales?”

“**Well**, what about the time that I was on the train and a man was about to beat an old woman senseless and I stepped in to stop him?” The angel flips through the book again, “Gee, I don’t see that in here ... when did that happen?”

Bob answered, “Couldn’t have been more than five minutes ago!”

(**The real** upshot to this joke is that this story actually happened to Rabbi Packouz. Many years ago he was on a train when a miscreant got on, blasting his “boom box” really loudly. An old woman walked up to him and wordlessly flicked it off. The young instigator glared at her threateningly and defiantly turned it back on – daring her to touch his radio again. Sure enough, she got up and turned it off again.

At that point the man jumped up and pulled back his fist to wallop the woman. Rabbi Packouz quickly moved to stand between them and implored, “Please, don’t hit the lady!” The man glared at him and after a moment decided – albeit angrily – to sit back down. At the next stop the old woman got off the train.

Rabbi Packouz was bewildered and a little surprised by the fact that this woman didn’t bother to thank him or even nod in appreciation to him for saving her from a beating, and it really bothered him. For the next few stops he turned it over in his mind as he was unable to understand how this woman had no appreciation for the fact that he had risked himself to save her. It really irked him until it dawned on him that he also had miraculously avoided a beating and he too never bothered to utter a word of appreciation to the Almighty for having saved **him**.)

This week’s Torah portion discusses reward and punishment and we learn some very important life lessons.

“If you walk in my statutes, and keep my commandments, and do them. I will provide you with rain in the proper time and the land will bring forth its crops and the trees will provide you fruit” (Leviticus 26:3-4).

The great medieval commentator known as Rashi is bothered by why the verse would first list “statutes” (*chukim* in Hebrew) and then use the catch-all phrase of “commandments” (*mitzvos* in Hebrew) in the second half of the verse. After all, the statutes are already included in the commandments of the Torah, so why mention statutes at all? Rashi answers that here the word “statutes” refers to the concept of being immersed in Torah study. That is, each person has an obligation to become intimately involved with the study of the Torah and make Torah study a central part of their life.

One of the most ancient translations of the Torah is known as the translation of Yonason Ben Uziel. He is seemingly bothered by the same question but he takes a different approach: “statutes” or “*chukim*” refers to those laws that are given without a discernible (or an accompanying) reason for doing them, whereas the word “commandments” or “*mitzvos*” refers to laws of social justice.

Still, his understanding of the word commandments also seems a bit problematic, after all the word “*mitzvos*” is all encompassing as there are many types of commandments; why should it be limited to the laws of social justice?

Part of the liturgy of our daily prayers reads: “[...] These are precepts (the reward) of which a man enjoys their fruit in this world, while the principal remains for him in the World to Come: Honoring one’s father and mother, acts of kindness, and bringing peace between a man and his fellow. But the study of Torah is equal to them all” (*Peah* 1:1).

Maimonides, in his commentary to this passage, states a very interesting principal of how a person is rewarded for following the Almighty’s commandments:

“**There are** two types of *mitzvos*; 1) those that are between an individual and God, such as wearing *teffilin* (phylacteries) and *tzitzis* (the tassels on a four cornered garment), observance of Shabbat, the prohibition against idol worship, etc. and 2) those that are between an individual and his fellow man, such as the prohibition against stealing or otherwise hurting another, the obligation to love others, honoring one’s parents, etc.”

Maimonides continues: “Those *mitzvos* that are between man and the Almighty are rewarded in the next world. *Mitzvos* that are between an individual and his fellow man are rewarded both in this world and in the next.”

Maimonides is explaining a basic principal of God’s system of reward; souls are an eternal concept and, as such, *mitzvos* that primarily serve in the development of one’s own soul get rewarded in the World to Come – a world in which one’s soul has primacy. Therefore, their proper reward is in the next (eternal) world.

But there are also *mitzvos* that have substantive benefits to others in this world. These *mitzvos* are also principally rewarded in the next world, but because they have positive effects in this world as well, the “interest” on the “principal” is paid to the individual in this world too. This is what the Mishnah means when it says that the “fruit” (i.e. the “interest”) is enjoyed in this world, but the “principal” remains for the World to Come.

This week’s Torah portion is introducing all the benefits that God provides in this world as recompense for observing the *mitzvos*. The reason Targum Yonason Ben Uziel translates *mitzvos* as the commandments related to social justice is because he agrees with Maimonides that those are the only *mitzvos* that are rewarded in this world as well as the next.

Fascinatingly, the Mishna equates the study of Torah to all the *mitzvos*. In other words, aside from the self-improvement and connection to the Almighty that emanates from Torah study, there are tangible benefits to this world through the study of Torah as well. This would also explain why Rashi understands that the rewards that follow the observance of “*My statutes*” refers to one’s immersion in Torah study.

Perhaps this is what the Talmud is referring to when it says, “Torah scholars increase peace in the world” (*Brachos* 64a). The Talmud chose to end its very first tractate with that statement, explaining that those Torah scholars are builders of the world and they increase the peace within it. The Torah, after all, was given to us to both improve ourselves and the world around us and we must make every effort to see that mission fulfilled.

TORAH PORTION: Bechukotai, Leviticus 26:3 - 27:34

This week’s portion begins with the multitude of blessings you will receive for keeping the commandments of the Torah (truly worth reading!). It also contains the *tochachah*, words of admonition: “If you will not listen to Me and will not perform all of these commandments...” There are seven series of seven punishments each. Understand that God does not punish for punishment’s sake; He wants to get our attention so that we will introspect, recognize our errors, and correct our ways. God does not wish to destroy us or annul His covenant with us. He wants us to know that there are consequences for our every action. He also wants to get our attention so that we do not stray so far away that we assimilate and disappear as a nation. I highly recommend reading *Leviticus* 26:14 - 45 and *Deuteronomy* 28.

SHABBAT LIGHTING: *Jerusalem* 7:01 Miami 7:47 Cape Town 5:28 Guatemala 6:08 Hong Kong 6:44 Honolulu 6:49

Jo’Burg 5:06 LA 7:38 London 8:47 Melbourne 4:53 Mexico 7:51 Moscow 8:36 New York 7:59 Singapore 6:49 Toronto 8:30

“QUOTE OF THE WEEK”: Life doesn’t get easier; you just get better at it.

Dedicated with Deep Appreciation to
Wulf Hirschfield



Shabbat Shalom,

Yitzchak Zweig

Rabbi Yitzchak Zweig

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