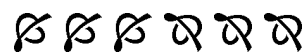


LESSON OUTLINE

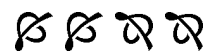
1. The Goal of Human Existence
2. Appreciating Spiritual Reward
 - A. Limitations of our current physical existence
 - B. Historical Influence of Greek Philosophers
 - C. Manifest absence of spiritual reward in the Written Torah.



Introduction

What is the purpose of human existence? How does the cycle of human life achieve this purpose? How can we explain the terms “Messianic era,” “revival of the dead,” and “World to Come,” and how do these concepts fit into G-d’s plan for mankind? In what ways does the physical nature of our current existence prevent us from comprehending the spiritual rewards of the World to Come?

In the two final lessons of this course (this week and next week), we will plot the path of human existence, noting the primary “stations” of life and their related characteristic experiences.



The Goal of Human Existence

The Sages have defined the world of physical existence through a pithy analogy that shows this world as but a small part of an all-encompassing system of existence:

Ethics of the Fathers (4:21):

Rabbi Ya’akov (1st century, Israel) said: This [physical] world is analogous to an anteroom before the Word-to-Come; prepare yourself in the anteroom, so that you may enter the throne room.

Rabbi Ovadiah Sforno (*Commentary to Ethics of the Fathers* [1470-1550, Italy]) explains the import of this Talmudic analogy:

The relationship between this world and the World to Come is compared to the relationship between the anteroom of the palace and the throne room, to teach us that human existence in this world is only a *means* to enable us to enter the World to Come. Only there, in the World to Come, will we bask in G-d’s Presence [for it is the “throne room,” where we will be in the direct presence of the King].

Time spent in an anteroom alone accomplishes nothing in terms of fulfilling any goal; similarly, one’s temporal existence in this world – which is, after all, only a relatively short stopover in the endless course of one’s existence – serves merely as a preparatory period, before we enter the World to Come.

The important message that this analogy holds for us is that it is crucial that we bear in mind constantly our purpose in this world: while a person is in the anteroom of the king’s chambers, he focuses all his energies on preparing himself properly, endeavoring thereby to earn the king’s favor. In this way, he hopes to gain entrance to the throne room for an audience with the king. Someone who has failed to prepare himself in the anteroom has forfeited his opportunity to meet the king;

moreover, he has wasted his time in the anteroom.

Human existence in this world is likewise an opportunity to gain entrance to the World to Come. Someone who does not take advantage of this time of temporary human existence to attain eternal reward in G-d's Presence in the World to Come, has undermined the purpose of his existence in this world.

Appreciating Spiritual Reward

Since our existence in this physical world is essentially a means by which to attain a future, spiritual world, it is necessary for us to understand why it is so difficult for us to visualize that world and to appreciate the spiritual rewards that await us there.

Limitations of Our Current Physical Existence

Maimonides (Introduction to Tractate *Sanhedrin*, ch. 10 [*Perek Chelek* ch. 3]):

Realize that our physical existence limits the scope of our perception. We can understand that someone who was blind from birth cannot fully grasp the concept of colors, and a deaf person cannot fully grasp the concept of sound. In the same way, we who are limited by physical existence cannot easily understand the nature of spiritual pleasures. Living in a physical world, many of the rewards we experience are temporal, physical pleasures. However, with conscious intellectual effort one can comprehend the eternal value of spiritual pleasures over physical pleasures, which are fleeting and are not so intense as the spiritual.

We will fully appreciate the spiritual pleasures of the World to Come only when we leave this world and pass on to a spiritual existence. At that point, all the pleasures we experience will be spiritual, and we will no longer have any desire to return to those lesser physical pleasures we enjoyed in this world. The transition from physical to spiritual pleasures that we will undergo can be compared to a young prince's passage into adulthood, when he becomes a king. When the prince was young, he enjoyed playing games with other children, whereas when he becomes king, he recognizes the incomparable value of using his intellect to rule his vast kingdom. He has no regrets for the youthful "pleasures" he left behind, for he no longer desires the ball games he used to enjoy with other children.

In truth, we can recognize that even in our physical existence, most people are more concerned with the intangible values of this world than with physical pleasures. Note, for example, the tremendous efforts people put forth in the pursuit of honor, recognition, and distinction over others. Such recognition and distinction offer no physical pleasure to those who crave it.

Similarly, people gladly forgo many physical pleasures for fear that they might result in embarrassment or public disgrace. By the same token, someone's passion for revenge against an enemy may lead him to forgo many a physical pleasure.

The monumental efforts that people put forth for the sake of pleasures that are not at all physical should clue us in, at least on a small scale, to the great appeal of spiritual pleasures that await us in the World to Come. These pleasures will stem from a clearer understanding of G-d and His Ways. They are eternal pleasures that cannot be described, either in words or through allegory. King David expressed wonderment at the intensity of this future pleasure, which surpasses all description: "*How [unimaginably] great is the reward [in the World to Come] that You have reserved [concealed from our perception] for those who fear You.*" (Psalms 31:20).

Historical Influence of Greek Philosophers

In addition to the natural barrier to comprehending spiritual pleasures that results from the physical condition of human existence, Nachmanides (1195-1270, Spain) identifies another, imposed barrier to spiritual concepts, that has influenced human thinking for thousands of years.

Nachmanides (Discourse on Torah):

During the early millennia following the creation of man, spiritual phenomena were universally acknowledged as part of legitimate fields of wisdom. Whether people recognized G-d as the single, independent Controller of the universe, or whether they misunderstood all that they saw, attributing independent powers to other spiritual forces, all of humanity sought to identify with the spiritual source of Creation and to invoke that source for the sake of mankind's wellbeing. [In this way people attempted to understand man's purpose in Creation and his relationship to the world around him.] Early man's historical proximity to Creation (3760 BCE) and to the Great Flood (2105 BCE) left them with no doubt that G-d (or the heavenly forces they mistakenly identified as gods) controls natural events; they did not see natural law as supreme.

With the rise of the Greek Empire came a new philosophy that radically altered man's view of natural phenomena. Greece brought forth a new nation that dissociated itself from the ancient traditions of mankind, and its philosophers created a doctrine that rejected the role of spiritual forces in Creation. Aristotle formulated a theory of a primeval world, in which natural law alone determines events on earth. He stubbornly denied the role of spiritual forces, whose validity has been proven countless times.

Manifest Absence of Spiritual Reward in the Written Torah

Although clear allusions to spiritual rewards or punishments can be found in the Torah, its manifest focus is on physical rewards and punishments, another factor that makes it difficult to appreciate the nature of spiritual reward and punishment:

Torah Text (Leviticus 26:3-45):

If you will follow My laws and are careful to keep My commandments, I will provide you with rain at the right time... You will have your fill of food, and you will live securely in the land... I will rid the land of dangerous animals, and the sword will not pass through your land... I will keep My sanctuary in your midst...

But if you do not listen to Me, and do not keep all these commandments... I will bring upon you feelings of anxiety... You will plant your crop in vain, because your enemies will eat it... I will cut off your food supply so that ten women will share one oven to bake bread, and they will need to weigh the crumbs of their bread to bring home. You will eat, but you will not be satisfied...

Torah commentators discuss this clear focus on physical, rather than spiritual, results of our behavior. Rabbi Avraham Ibn Ezra (1089-1164, Spain; Torah commentary to Deuteronomy 32:39) shares Maimonides' approach regarding the difficulty in comprehending spiritual benefits.

Rabbi Avraham Ibn Ezra:

The spiritual reward of the World to Come is too profound for the vast majority of people in this world to comprehend. The reason is that this spiritual reward is a reward of the soul, which only those with knowledge of the deepest Torah wisdom can understand.

Because the Torah was given to the entire Jewish people – not only to the greatest scholars among them – the Torah discusses reward and punishment in terms that everyone can easily relate to, within the framework of this world.

Rabbi Ibn Ezra explains the absence of spiritual reward for mitzvot, but he does not address the question of why the Torah elaborates on the temporal, physical rewards of this world. Maimonides explains:

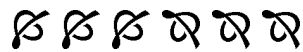
Maimonides (loc. cit.):

The Torah mentions the physical rewards or punishments that result from observance or violation of its commandments, in keeping with the principle which our Sages explain, that “the reward for performing one mitzvah is [the opportunity to perform] another mitzvah, and the punishment for a sin is [the opportunity to perform] another sin” (Ethics of the Fathers 4:2).

This principle teaches us that when the Jewish people as a whole exhibit strong initiative, exerting

themselves to perform G-d's mitzvot, G-d will reward them with an environment that is more conducive to the performance of mitzvot. G-d will create the setting for a tranquil existence for the Jewish people, to enable them to earn a greater spiritual reward. Thus, when the people make a strong effort to do mitzvot, G-d will remove the common impediments such as famine, war, disease and plague, that hamper people from devoting themselves to G-d's service. Instead, He will provide health and peace in the land of Israel.

On the other hand, when the Jewish people are unwilling to devote themselves to observing the mitzvot, G-d will respond by increasing the obstacles to mitzvah performance. He will create a tumultuous existence for the people, which will make it very difficult for them to earn the spiritual reward of the World to Come. This unfavorable situation is summed up in the verse: *"When you had plenty of everything, you would not serve G-d your L-rd with happiness and a glad heart. You will therefore serve your enemies when G-d sends them against you, and it will be in hunger, thirst, nakedness and absolute want..."* (Deuteronomy 28:47-48).



Questions

Address your correspondence to: foundations@jewishstudies.org

1. How can we overcome the barriers to appreciating spiritual reward?
2. Your questions and comments: _____