

Reward & Punishment

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

"If you obey my commands...then I will send the rains in good time." The Second Paragraph of the Shema implies a direct correlation between keeping God's commandments and being rewarded with the world's bounty and thriving. Conversely, betraying God brings about destruction and the failure of the physical world to produce food.

On a rational level this does not make sense, nor do we see any such strict correlation in real life. Quite the contrary. Bad people often do well and you could say that Israel has flourished when non-religious secular Jews applied themselves to improving its agricultural productivity. Success often relies on luck, international trade (even crimes) and factors that have nothing to do with being a good, spiritual person.

One response is to say that this is all metaphorical. What the Torah is talking about is mental attitude, not reward and punishment. That when one feels closer to God, one looks at the world and one's own life, more positively. One feels blessed, more content and at ease. Whereas anxiety, depression and frustration are all the hallmarks of a materialist society.

Another is that this is not meant personally but nationally. As a people, we thrive when we are united in our mission and our heritage. Otherwise we are divided and in a state of conflict. In Pirkei Avot you even have the point of view that the reward for a good deed is another good deed and the punishment for a bad deed is another bad deed. Indeed, good deeds are their own reward and bad ones their own punishment. Yet others say that there is no reward in this world despite everything the Torah says and really it all comes right (or wrong) in the World to Come. We have theological choices!

But another way of looking at this text is historical and archaeological. All the declarations of ancient Mesopotamian and Persian kings included a very specific formula. It went like this. *"If you obey me, your king, and keep my laws and treaties I will protect you. The rains will come in their time. The land will be fruitful and your wives. You will have plenty to eat and drink. You will be happy and content. But if you reject me as your king and disobey my rules, the rains will not come, the land will be destroyed and there will be no food and you will be killed and your children enslaved."*

In other words, the Torah is using language that would have been familiar in its day as the formulaic contract between a monarch and his people rather, a contract between God and Israel rather than a statement of theological truth.