

Re'eh: We Are All Project Managers

- Shlomo Riskin.

In this dvar Torah, Rabbi Riskin gives us an insight into the inspiration that impelled him to go on aliya and devote all his spiritual and physical resources to building Efrat and his Israeli Educational Institutions.

REEH: WE ARE ALL PROJECT MANAGERS (August 21, 2003)
by Rabbi Shlomo Riskin

Efrat, Israel -"Behold, I set before you today a blessing and a curse. The blessing, when you internalize (heed) the commandments of the Lord your G-d. And the curse, if you do not internalize (heed) the commandments of the Lord your G-d." (Deuteronomy 11:26,27)

Two problems face us as we read these verses, one textual and the other existential. The textual issue is based on the lack of parallelism: "the blessing, when (asher) you internalize, the curse if (im) you do not internalize;" we would expect to find consistency, either "when. when" or "if you do,. if you do not" in both instances!

The existential issue hits us hard, especially in Israel during these fateful but difficult times. We have lost more than eight-hundred Israelis during these last three years in the Oslo war, either soldiers in the line of battle or innocent victims at home, at school, at a bus stop, who were targeted by inhuman suicide bombers. Many if not most of these were our best, our brightest and our most deserving of reward in accordance with the opening verses of our Torah portion; how can we possibly explain the many instances of suffering and pain on the part of so many virtuous souls who certainly internalized the commandments of G-d.

I believe that the precise Biblical language reveals a profound truth about Torah commandments and human affairs. After all, the Torah iterates and reiterates that the Almighty gave us His laws "for your good;" proper ethical conduct ensures a well-ordered social structure devoid of aggression and violence, and the Sabbaths, Festivals and ritual purity provide for a stable and inter-generational familial nucleus united by meaningful occasions of joy, study and song. Hence an immediate blessing always comes immediately with the performance of the commandment; "the reward for a commandment is the very fulfillment of the commandment, built-in!"

In the instance of transgressions, there is also a built-in punishment; evil bears bitter fruit, the sinner is eventually discovered, unfaithfulness and deception destroys relationships and undermines families. However, unlike the blessing, the "built-in" curse is often not experienced until later on, sometimes not until the last years of the transgressor. Hence the adverb used by the Torah is not when, which connotes immediacy, but is rather "if you do not internalize the commandments," then the curse will come, but not right away.

The underlying assumption of this interpretation is that aside from the natural cause and effect of our actions, the Almighty does not extrinsically reward the righteous or punish the sinner in this world; one does not have the right to expect that if one is an honest businessman, one will be guaranteed great profits, or if one observes the Sabbath, one will live a long and healthy life.

This world, according to many of our Talmudic Sages, is a world of freedom of choice for every individual.

If the righteous would consistently be rewarded with long life, good health and a large bank account and the sinners would die at an early age in poverty, choosing to follow the commandments would be a no brainer. Indeed, the only guarantee that the Almighty makes is the eternity of the Jewish people and our ultimate success in redeeming the world. As far as everything else is concerned, "not on individual merit does the length of one's life, the number and quality of one's children and the extent of one's sustenance depend, but rather on luck (mazel) do these things depend" (B.T. Moed Katan 28a).

A seminal incident in my life, which in large measure was the catalyst for my decision to make aliyah, magnificently explains this particular theological position (which is by no means unanimously accepted by our Sages). In the fall of 1970 I was in the (then) Soviet Union on a mission from the sainted Lubavitcher Rebbe (of blessed memory) to establish four underground Yeshivot - in Moscow, Leningrad (sic), Rega and Vilna. The Sabbath in Rega found me in a large, cavernous and almost empty Synagogue (perhaps thirty Jews in a Sanctuary that could easily seat a thousand) surrounded by four KGB agents. The gabbai whispered in Yiddish, "We will wait for you after the services in the basement. We are thirsty for Torah. But meet us without your friends."

At 12 p.m. sharp the Prayers ended, my "guardian satans" left (probably for lunch), and I descended to a darkened basement; fifteen men and two women were expectantly standing around a table set with bottles of vodka and honey cake. The gabbai requested that I make Kiddush (over the vodka, apparently), and give a Torah thought (d'var torah), after which we all sang a song and danced a dance. This procedure - vodka, honey cake, Torah thought, song and dance - was repeated nine times. By that point two things happened: the Soviet Union, which had until then resembled black Tisha B'Av, turned into pink Purim, and I had no more Torah thoughts to present on that week's reading.

The Torah reader, Reb Yisrael Feedman, helped me out. He began by asking how the Torah could command the Jews to pay a workman his wages as soon as the day ended. After all, the Talmud explains a child's premature death in the midst of honoring his father and the cruel torture of a pious religious Sage at the hands of the Romans, with the statement: "There is no reward for the commandments in this world, only in the world to come." (B.T. Kiddushin, 39b) So how can G-d expect us to reward our workmen at the end of each day when He Himself only rewards us at the end of our lives?

Reb Yisrael answered his own question. We are not day laborers vis a vis G-d; we are rather project managers. Our lives must be dedicated to the one unique project we are best qualified to execute in order to make the world a better place. And a Project Manager is always paid only on completion of the project.

The commandments have their own built-in rewards and punishments. As far as other, external rewards are concerned, they come only after we conclude our life's project - in the life after life known as the world to come. Hopefully we are each busily occupied in doing the project we are

most capable of doing for the greater glory of tikkun olam (world perfection).
Shabbat Shalom.

You can find Rabbi Riskin's parshiot on the web at:

<http://www.ohrtorahstone.org.il/parsha/index.htm> Ohr Torah Stone Colleges and Graduate Programs Rabbi Shlomo Riskin, Chancellor Rabbi Chaim Brovender, Dean

(Submitted by Nisson Shulman)