



*Series on Belief & Faith- Man*

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*Man, Reward and Punishment*



**Noahide Nations Nagid Clergy  
Continuing Education Program**

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# *Man, Reward and Punishment*

## **Introduction**

In our last lesson on theology and belief we discussed the Torah conception of God. In this lesson we will explore man.

## **The Purpose of Creation**

“Why did God create the world?” is perhaps the hardest question ever asked. To answer it, we have to presuppose an understanding of God’s exact will and innermost thoughts before creation. If you studied the prior lesson on God carefully, then you will realize that this is impossible<sup>1</sup>.

To further complicate things, consider that God is an absolute perfection, without lack or needs. He didn’t need to create us. Therefore, his ultimate reasons for doing so are unfathomable.

Any discussion of God’s purpose is only possible from our perspective as the beneficiary of creation.

## **The Greatest Act of Love**

Taking into consideration all that we cannot know, it informs us as to what we do know. If G-d is perfect and had no need to create us, then the act of creation must

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<sup>1</sup> See *Moreh Nevukhim* 3:13; Yoma 38a; *Avos d’Rabbi Nasan* 41.

stand as the ultimate act of altruism.<sup>2</sup> The Psalms speak of creation as such, describing it as an act of love:

*The world is built of love.*<sup>3</sup>

It is also an act of the ultimate goodness:

*God saw all that He made and – behold! It was very good!*<sup>4</sup>

Since God is perpetually creating all reality,<sup>5</sup> it means that His goodness and love is constantly sustaining all creation:

*God is good to all; His love is upon all his works.*<sup>6</sup>

At every instant God's pure desire for us flows throughout every atom of creation.

## **Partaking of True Good**

*You let me know the path of life; in your presence is the fullness of joy. In your right hand is eternal bliss.*<sup>7</sup>

*I am The Lord your God who instructs you for your own reward...*<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> *Emunos VeDeos* I:4; *Reshis Chochma Shaar HaTeshuva* I; *Derech HaShem* I:2:1; *Sheni Luchos HaBris, Beis Yisroel* I:21b; *Likutei Moharan* 64.

<sup>3</sup> 89:3.

<sup>4</sup> Genesis 1:35.

<sup>5</sup> This is the doctrine of perpetual creation discussed in an earlier lesson.

<sup>6</sup> Psalms 145:9.

<sup>7</sup> Psalms 16:11.

<sup>8</sup> Isaiah 48:17.

This first verse tells us that God is the ultimate goodness<sup>9</sup>. The second verse tells us both that Man is capable of partaking of that ultimate goodness and that God instructs us as to how we should do so.<sup>10</sup>

However, in order to be aware of divine goodness, we must know its absence. This is another reason for *tzimtzum*, the restriction of God's presence in the physical creation.<sup>11</sup> By reducing the everyday immanent experience of God, true experiences of His goodness can be fully recognized.

## Free Will

*I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day: I have put before you life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life...*<sup>12</sup>

This verse alludes to man's free will – his ability to choose whether to partake of God's goodness or to turn away from it.

If man had no free will, then enjoyment of God's goodness would not be true enjoyment. It would be a compulsory, rote experience devoid of greater meaning. Once he has the ability to desire and choose God's goodness, only then does the experience become valuable.<sup>13</sup>

Therefore, God created man with free will. Besides God, man is the only being who can act upon his free choice. In this sense, man resembles God. This is the fundamental understanding of man having been created "in the image of God."<sup>14</sup>

Free will, however, requires both an internal and external mechanism in order to function.

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<sup>9</sup> *Ibn Ezra ad loc; Emunos VeDeyos III. See also Derech HaShem I:2:1.*

<sup>10</sup> *Emunos VeDeos I:4.*

<sup>11</sup> See the lesson on God.

<sup>12</sup> Deuteronomy 30:19.

<sup>13</sup> There is a massive amount of literature on the necessity of free will. For a basic overview, see *Hilchos Teshuva 5; Emunos VeDeyos IV:4; Reishis Chochmah Shaar Teshuva I; Zohar I:23a.*

<sup>14</sup> See *Derech HaShem I:2.*

**Internal Aspects:  
Yetzer Tov vs.  
Yetzer Hara**

Internally, man is imbued with two opposing forces:

- The *yetzer tov* – the desire for good, altruism, self-betterment, and mitzvos.
- The *yetzer hara* – the desire for evil, selfishness, self-destruction, and transgression.

This dual nature of man explains the apparent contradiction between these two verses:

*And God created man in his image; in the image of G-d he created him.*<sup>15</sup>  
and  
*The desire of man's heart is evil from his youth.*<sup>16</sup>

The first verse refers to man's divine potential – the *yetzer tov*, the desire for good. The second refers to man's base desires – his *yetzer hara*, the desire for evil.

In the Talmud,<sup>17</sup> Rabbi Nachman bar Rav Chisda sees an allusion to both aspects in the verse

*And God formed [י"צו] man...*

Rabbi Nachman points out that the word **י"צו** is spelled with an extra yud. He sees the two yuds in the word as an allusion to God's having formed man with two desires (also, the word *yotzer*, formed, is a cognate of the word *yetzer*, desire).

In Torah thought all of man's actions and choices are the result of a struggle between these two inclinations. One seeks the holy, the other the profane - one desires knowledge, the other wants only physical pleasure.

One might think that the goal of man is to entirely ignore his evil desire. This is not so. The ideal for man is to subdue his bad desire to his good desire, thus making it a tool of divine service.

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<sup>15</sup> Genesis 1:27.

<sup>16</sup> Genesis 8:21.

<sup>17</sup> *Berachos* 61a.

**External  
Aspects: Man vs.  
the World**

In order for Man to have free will, he must be placed in an environment that allows him to exercise his power of choice. Therefore, God created a world filled with opportunities for both good and evil in which all things speak to his ultimate purpose:

*God has made everything for his own purpose, even the wicked...*<sup>18</sup>

*I form light and create darkness. I make peace and create evil. I am God – I do all these things.*<sup>19</sup>

In this environment, any and every decision a person makes is the direct result of a nuanced struggle between these opposite inclinations.

How man decides to use or pervert the opportunities God offers is man's choice alone and one for which he bears 100% of the responsibility:

*If a person sins... he bears full responsibility for his action.*<sup>20</sup>

Since the potential for evil resides within man and is evenly matched with his capacity for good, the Torah rejects any concept of an all-evil being or devil who tempts people into sin. To iterate: people are 100% responsible for their own sins.

## **Reward & Punishment**

We tend to think that we are rewarded *for* our good deeds and punished *for* our transgressions. This view is true only of laws created and administered by man. Spiritual reward and punishment operate according to a different mechanic. Just as God created the natural world with its own principles of cause and effect, He did the

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<sup>18</sup> Proverbs 16:4.

<sup>19</sup> Isaiah 45:7.

<sup>20</sup> Leviticus 5:17.

same with the spiritual world.<sup>21</sup> Within this system reward and punishment are *direct results* of one's actions rather than things meted out *for* one's actions.<sup>22</sup>

This idea runs throughout *Tanakh*:<sup>23</sup>

*A wicked man's sins shall entrap him; he will be bound in the binds of his own transgression.*<sup>24</sup>

*God is known by the judgment he carries out when the wicked man is ensnared in the work of his own hands.*<sup>25</sup>

*He who digs a pit shall fall into it.*<sup>26</sup>

These two verses make clear that God's justice is programmed into the spiritual law of the universe and operates as a direct result of one's own actions. The same applies to reward.<sup>27</sup> However, there is a difference: while punishment is precisely meted out, reward is given liberally.<sup>28</sup> Furthermore, the ultimate reward for good lasts for eternity while the punishment for evil is only temporary. Because the nature of reward and punishment differ, good deeds cannot cancel out evil and vice versa. This is learned from a verse in the Torah:

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<sup>21</sup> Just as with His natural law, it is only altered in very rare circumstances. See *Shemos Rabbah* 30:6; *Vayikra Rabbah* 35:3; *Yerushalmi Rosh HaShanah* 1:3.

<sup>22</sup> Numerous Midrashim discuss this idea. See *Kobeles Rabbah* 3:11; *Vayikra Rabbah* 19:6; *Yalkut Shimoni* 2:938.

<sup>23</sup> For more examples see Proverbs 13:6; Obadiah 1:15; Psalms 18:25-26.

<sup>24</sup> Proverbs 5:22

<sup>25</sup> Psalms 9:17.

<sup>26</sup> Proverbs 6:27.

<sup>27</sup> *Sotah* 1:8; *Tosefta Sotah* 4:1; *Bava Metz'ia* 86a; *Sotah* 17a; *Chullin* 89a; *Sefer Chasidim* 53. There are many, many, sources and examples.

<sup>28</sup> See *Sotah* 9b; *Sefer Chasidim* 698; *Tos. Yom Tov* on *Sotah* 9:8; *Tos. Sotah* 11a s.v. Miriam. Again, there are many, many, sources and examples.



*God does not give special consideration or take bribes.*<sup>29</sup>

What does it mean that God does not take bribes? Our sages explain that God does not take the exchange of good deeds for evil ones.<sup>30</sup>

An individual is punished for all the evil he does and rewarded for all of the good.

However, the punishment that one deserves for his transgressions can be changed into the merit of a mitzvah by sincere, loving repentance.<sup>31</sup>

**Reward in This  
World?**

As we will see in a future lesson, the primary place for reward and punishment is *Olam Haba*, the World to Come. Nevertheless, under certain circumstances, a person can receive reward and punishment for part of his deeds in this world. We will discuss this more in future lessons.

**Middah Keneged  
Middah**

Many times, but not always, there is an obvious correspondence between the deed and its reward and the crime and its punishment. This relationship is called *middah keneged middah* – *measure-matching-measure*. When this happens it is in order to demonstrate God's law and further reveal his kingship in the world.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Deuteronomy 10:17.

<sup>30</sup> See Ramban ad loc.; Avos 4:22 and numerous commentaries ad. loc.;

<sup>31</sup> *Yoma* 86a; *Yerushalmi Peah* 1:1; *Ikkarim* 4:25; *Shemos Rabbah* 31:1; *Bamidbar Rabbah* 10:1; *Shir HaShirim Rabbah* 6:1 and much more.

<sup>32</sup> See *Ikkarim* IV: 9; *Mekhilta Shemos* 14:26 and 18:11; *Shabbos* 105b; *Sanbedrin* 90a; *Nedarim* 32a and many, many more examples.

## Summary of the Lesson

1. God's innermost reasons for wanting to create the world are mysterious and cannot be understood. We can only understand His reasons from our perspective as the beneficiaries of creation.
2. Creation was the greatest, truest, and purest act of love and altruism. Since God is constantly creating, His love and goodness are constantly being sustaining the world.
3. It is possible for man to partake of and experience the underlying goodness that sustains creation. He does so by keeping the mitzvos and serving and clinging to God.
4. In order to know this good, we must know its absence. This is another reason for the idea of *tzimtzum*.
5. Man must voluntarily earn this good; otherwise his benefit would not be true benefit. Only by choosing it voluntarily does man truly enjoy it. Therefore God gave man free will.
6. In this aspect of free will man, in a very small way, resembles his Creator. This is the idea of man having been made in God's image.
7. To enable free will, man was given two conflicting internal drives: a desire to do good and a desire to do bad. Man was also placed in an environment which provides him with choices and contexts in which to exercise his will.
8. Reward and punishments are best conceived as the effects of our choices rather than judgments that are meted out. Reward and punishment are the effects of a "spiritual law" established by God and similar to natural law.
9. One's mitzvos cannot cancel out his transgressions. A person is rewarded for all of his mitzvos and punished for all of his sins. However, sincere repentance can convert one's sins into merits.
10. The primary place for reward and punishment is not in this world. Nevertheless, some reward and punishment is possible in this world depending on the circumstances.
11. Occasionally the relationship between the mitzvah/reward and the sin/punishment is obvious. Sometimes it is not.