

# parashas Bereishis

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## P E R C E P T I O N S

Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat? (Bereishis 3:11)

TESHUVA IS ALWAYS necessary. Torah expects perfection. Man is imperfect. Teshuva—repentance—fills the gap. Torah teaches us the right way to live. Life shows us how to stray from it. God revealed to us how to make amends and do things better the next time.

It's more than a gift. It's a MIRACLE. We take teshuva for granted, as if it is a constitutional right. The truth is, as Adam HaRishon once thought, mistakes should be the end of us.<sup>1</sup> WE may not think it is fair, and WE may not like it. But does that stop courts from locking up the guilty, or even from executing them?

The Midrash tells us that God wanted to make the world according to din—judgment. It was only when He saw that the world could not survive without mercy that He added that to the program as well.<sup>2</sup>

What? What is that supposed to mean? If we were talking about human creators, it would be understand-

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<sup>1</sup> Avodah Zarah 8a.

<sup>2</sup> Rashi, Bereishis 1:1.

able. As much as we try and get things right the first time, we're not omniscient. We can't plan for EVERYTHING.

But we're talking about God here. He IS omniscient. Better yet, He's BEYOND time. There is no Past and Future by God, only Present. This means that He already knew before He made the world that mercy would be necessary for it to continue to exist. In fact, he made man to NEED it, and the world to SUPPORT it. So why mention that mercy was a last-minute revision?

To teach us something REALLY important. The midrash is teaching us that as much as we NEED mercy, and DEPEND upon it just to survive, this is far from ideal. More importantly, we are being told that mercy is far from FREE. The Midrash is reminding us that the backbone of Creation is din, and that God is about justice, STRICT justice.

This means that when life is all said and done, you will always have gotten what you "paid" for AND paid for what you had gotten. Payment might not always have been on our terms, and according to our schedule, but God has His way of collecting debts.

And here's the surprising part: it's actually what WE want. Well, at least our SOULS. Our BODIES love mercy. They love to have their "cake" and eat it too. Fair is only important to them when THEY feel cheated. Honesty is only important when THEY are being lied to. Judgment is only good when they do it to others, not when it is applied to them.

The soul, however, is truth, GODLY truth. It's the part of us that feels wholesome when we take responsibility for our mistakes in life, when we right the wrongs we caused. It's the soul that wants to connect to God, whose "seal" is emes—truth, and therefore wants only emes for

itself:

This<sup>3</sup> is exactly in line with what Rebi Yehoshua ben Levi has said: “What [is the meaning of] what is written, ‘Passing through the valley of Baca they make it a place of springs; the early rain clothes it with blessings’ (Tehillim 84:7). ‘Passing’ is an allusion to men who transgress the will of The Holy One, Blessed Is He; ‘valley’ [is an allusion to these men] for whom Gehinom is made deep; ‘of Baca’ [signifies] that they weep and shed tears; ‘they make it a place of springs,’ like the constant flow of the altar drains; ‘the early rain clothes it with blessings,’ they acknowledge the justice of their punishment and declare before Him, ‘Master of the Universe! You have judged well, You have condemned well, and it is good that You have provided Gehinom for the wicked and Paradise for the righteous’.” (Eiruvin 19a)

The truth is that the goal of life actually is to spiritually grow past the need for mercy, to MERIT din. That’s right, MERIT din. It’s the only way to guarantee that we don’t have to pay for our mercies on the other side of history, in Gehinom, in preparation for the World-to-Come.

This is why the great Rebi Akiva was so GRATEFUL for his means of death. To everyone else looking on—then and now—he was “simply” tortured to death in one of the cruelest ways possible.<sup>4</sup> Even his own students questioned his “positive” attitude to his horrific situation.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> The acknowledgment of the justice of divine judgment.

<sup>4</sup> The Romans rakes his skin with metal combs.

<sup>5</sup> Brochos 61b.

But he answered them that he had waited all of his life for such a moment, for the chance to serve God with “all of his life.” It “pleased” him, in spite of his intense personal suffering, that God found him WORTHY of STRICT JUSTICE on literally the last day of his life.<sup>6</sup>

This is why the Talmud not only ends the heart-wrenching account with praise of Rebi Akiva, but with a Heavenly promise of safe passage to “Chai Olamim—Eternal Life,” WITHOUT any need for Gehinom first. His means of departure from this world cleaned his slate, something that will have happened to few people throughout history.

Hence, the Talmud in SO many places has only high praise for yesurim—suffering. And this is why all of this is such a MAJOR discussion that must be studied and appreciated by everyone. Skipping it only results in a lot of personal disappointment and a confused perspective on life.

The point is that since din is the way the world SHOULD run:

But what is the reason for silencing him if he says “Your mercies extend even to the bird’s nest”? Two Amoraim in the West, Rebi Yossi bar Abin and Rebi Yossi bar Zebida, give different answers. One says it is because he creates jealousy among God’s creatures, the other, because he makes the traits of The Holy One, Blessed Is He, mercy-based, when they are really [Divine] decrees. (Brochos 33b)

teshuvah is a miraculous gift that can NEVER to be taken for granted. This is true every day of the year,

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<sup>6</sup> He was actually 120 years old on that day.

throughout all of history. But as the Talmud makes clear, it is certainly something not to be underestimated as we quickly head towards the last redemption:

Rebi Eliezer said: “If the Jewish people repent, they will be redeemed. If not, they will not be redeemed.”

Rebi Yehoshua told him, “If the Jewish people repent, they will be redeemed, but if not, they will not be redeemed?” “Rather,” [Rebi Yehoshua countered,] “The Holy One, Blessed is He, will set a king over them, whose decrees will be as difficult as those of Haman,<sup>7</sup> causing the Jewish people to repent, and in this manner [God] will bring them back to the right path.” (Sanhedrin 97b)

What are we waiting for? The next Haman?

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<sup>7</sup> Haman was the second-in-command over Persia who sought to destroy the Jewish people in the year 355 BCE, resulting in a miraculous salvation and the story of Purim.