

Re'eh

Why be good? This is a timeless question which has exercised Jewish thinkers through the ages.

Do you do it because you're altruistic? Do you do it because, that way, you'll have it done back to you? Do you do it because you'll get a reward in heaven? Or do you do it because it's the right thing to do?

In truth, the very fact that we're asking this question shows that we have a choice – we don't have to be good.

The opening lines of this week's *sedra* are, "See. I have set before you this day a blessing and a curse – a blessing if you obey the commandments of the Lord your God which I command you this day and a curse if you will not obey the commandments of the Lord your God but turn aside from the way which I command you this day to go after other gods which you have not known."

Nechama Liebovitz enlists the help of three commentators to understand these concepts. The nineteenth century commentator known as the *Netziv* notes that the word for evil is rendered here in the plural – *ra'ot*, whereas the word for good is in the singular – *tovah*. His explanation is that God provides would-be evil doers with one single bit of good prior to the evil deed they are about to commit. This is designed to serve as an incentive for the prospective evil doer to do only good works. Hence, says the *Netziv*, only good comes from God, whilst suffering and retribution are brought on people as a direct result of their sinful acts.

This was the explanation given to Job by his "comforters" as to why he had suffered so badly. I don't know whether many people would share this view today – it is a theodicy for those who believe in an omnipotent God – a God who controls everything that happens.

If you don't like the idea that God is involved in steering people towards good deeds, look at the *Talmud* in *Shabbat* page 127a, which we read at the beginning of the morning service. It says, "These are the things whose fruits a person eats in this world, while the '*keren kayemet*' (that is, the fund, or capital) exists for him in the world to come and these are they: - honouring parents, acts of kindness, attendance at the *bet midrash* morning and evening, welcoming strangers, visiting the sick, providing for a bride, accompanying the dead, devotion in prayer and making peace between people," This seems to suggest that a person carrying out these commandments gets some kind of gratification here on earth from performing these *mitzvot* (although in what form it doesn't say) and that the source of that gratification will be available in the world to come – presumably for sale or retention as an investment. A lawyer would say that one who carries out these *mitzvot* is the life tenant and the remainder man.

To return to Nechama Liebovitz's analysis of the problem, in order to explore the idea that a *mitzvah* provides its own reward, she cites another nineteenth century commentator, the Malbim, who derives a proof for this from the language used in the

first line of the *sedra*. Although the text tells us that we'll have a blessing if we obey the commandments and a curse if we do not, Malbim observes that two different Hebrew words are used: “*et ha-bracha asher tishm'u*” – literally a blessing that you obey and “*ha-klallah im lo tsh'm'u*” – literally a curse if you don't obey. Malbim says that the phrase “a blessing that you obey” means that the blessing you get is the very obedience to the commandment. He says the reward you get is the good deed itself and so the reward follows automatically. But what about the curse you get if you don't obey? Does this also follow automatically – in other words, are the sinful automatically cursed?

For an explanation of this, we have to turn to another commentator, Bahya. He says that that is precisely why the word “if” is used when referring to the situation where you don't obey – you have a choice, so the curse doesn't necessarily have to happen – you just have to use your free will to avoid sin.

Rashi notes that each of the two conditions is followed by the action which the person will carry out. In the case of the blessing, it's “the commandment which God commands you” and in the case of the curse, it's “turning aside from the way in which God commands you.” Rashi says that the blessing is given retroactively on account of the *mitzvah* which has been performed – God first rewards us with a blessing on *condition* that we remain obedient to His wishes – whereas the curse doesn't come retroactively – it only comes after we have sinned. The premise is that the world is not evil; it is we who make it so. It says in Psalm 104, *Borechi Nafshi*, “all the ugliness and misfortune are consequences of the evil committed by man” and, later on, it says, “let the sins be consumed out of the earth and the wicked will be no more” – that is to say, once you remove the curse of evil from the world (which is down to us) you are left with the blessings which God provided. Now, says Nechama Liebovitz, we can understand how there is only one good (*to'vah*) but multiple evils (*ra'ot*).

Strangely, Nechama Liebovitz's brother, Yeshayahu, does not hold with this idea that you get a reward for carrying out a *mitzvah*. He was of the opinion that the *mitzvot* were an obligation upon us and that we should not seek reasons why we should perform them or rewards or blessings for doing them. He used to say that he would get up in the morning eager to perform the *mitzvah* of saying the blessing over the washing of his hands – not because that was a pleasant thing to do – not because he would receive a reward – but because that was his obligation.

I've never been able to reconcile that point of view with the opening lines of this *sedra* – if we have the free will to choose between a blessing and a curse how is it that we are obligated to perform *mitzvot* – with no free will? And anyway, are we automata – slaves forced to obey commands – animals whose instinct directs them? No. A normal person does not just perform *mitzvot* unless he has the strength to impose a discipline on himself to obey the rules of his Creator.

So, given that we do have free will, what are the considerations that come into play when making that choice? Well, we clearly have to work harder to carry out a *mitzvah* than not to. We have to put ourselves out – for our fellow man or to observe *kashrut* or to keep *Shabbat*. But there are some *mitzvot* that do require less effort – resting on *Shabbat*, for example.

When exercising the free will, do we consciously veer towards the *mitzvah* because we'll receive a blessing or because we'll receive a reward in the world to come? Or do we do it for altruistic reasons?

The atheist, Richard Dawkins, says there's no such thing as altruism – everything we do is for the benefit of ourselves, our family or our descendants. How does this sit with the idea that when you use your free will you obtain an unquantifiable and immeasurable benefit, in the form of a blessing? Well, in accounting terms, this is an unquantifiable right to future benefit and would not appear on any balance sheet that I would prepare so it does seem to me that using your free will to perform a *mitzvah* is an altruistic act.

There is another school of thought which says that the commandments are not valid because Moses discovered them. You could say that Moses discovered them because they are valid. In other words, the *mitzvot* are natural laws which we would come up with if we had to work them out from first principles.

Every year in the *bar mitzvah* class that I used to teach, I started the year by asking the class to arrive at a set of classroom rules. I always found that, by holding a reasoned discussion with the pupils, we arrived at the rules which I had already formulated.

In this school of thought, the *mitzvot* are the natural laws one would keep if one had to work out for one's self what the laws should be.

Nevertheless, being good is difficult. Even given the fact that we may receive a blessing (whatever that is) if we are good and that we may receive the opposite (is that no blessing?) if we are bad, it is still difficult to be good.

When Queen Victoria ascended the throne, she said, "I will be good." That is as brief a manifesto as any of us needs. She had obviously read the first line of *Re'eh* and chosen a blessing over a curse!

Shabbat Shalom

Allan Myers, Sept 3rd 2016