

Parashat Bechukotai

אם בְּחַקְתִּי תֵלְכוּ וְאֵת מִצְוֹתַי תִּשְׁמְרוּ וְעָשִׂיתֶם אֹתָם. וְנָתַתִּי גֶשְׁמִיכֶם
בְּעֵתָם וְנָתַנְהָ הָאָרֶץ יְבוּלָהּ וְעֵץ הַשָּׂדֶה יִתֵּן פְּרִיָּו.

“If you will follow My laws and faithfully observe My commandments, I will grant your rains in their season, so that the earth shall yield its produce and the trees of the field their fruit.”¹

ספר הליקוטים, פרשת בחקותי

ראוי להבין דברים אלו, שנראים כאילו השייט משדל לישראל בדברים, ומפתה אותם לומר, אם תעשו כך יהיה לכם כך.

Sefer HaLikutim, parashat Bechukotai

It is fitting that we understand these words, which read as if G-d is trying to convince and entice the Jewish people, telling them that if they do such and such they will receive such and such reward.

The tenor of these verses at face value is not that they describe a simple cause and effect relationship, but that G-d is trying to coax us into observing His commandments with the promise of reward.

וגי"כ, שהם נראים שהם ברכות גשמיות:

Furthermore, the reward seems to be blessings of material beneficence.

And our sages have told us that the true reward for keeping G-d's commandments awaits us in the afterlife.

ואמנם הענין הוא, ירמוז על סוד הגלגול,

The explanation is that this passage alludes to the concept of transmigration of souls.

כמו שידעת, כי מתגלגלת הנשמה בשני יסודות, והם דומם וצומח, ואח"כ עולה אל מדריגת בעלי חיים, שהם הבהמות. ואם יזכה יותר, עולה למדריגת אדם,

As you know, the soul is initially reincarnated in the mineral or vegetable kingdoms, and afterwards ascends into the animal kingdom, i.e., cattle. If it merits further, it ascends to the kingdom of man.

Transmigration is the means by which the soul atone for the sins it committed in its first, human lifetime. In the words of the Arizal:

וניצולת אותה הנשמה כפי זמן הקצוב עליה, כמו שכתבנו בדרוש הגלגולים, וע"ש באורך.

The soul descends to be incarnated into these lower forms of existence for the time allotted to it, as I (Rabbi Chaim Vital) have explained at length in my book recording

1. Leviticus 26:3-4.

the Arizal's exposition on transmigration.

In order to understand this concept more fully, we will interrupt the present citation from *Sefer HaLikutim* and quote from the work Rabbi Chaim Vital refers to:

שער הגלגולים, הקדמה כב
 ודע, כי כמעט אין אדם בארץ אשר ימלט מגלגולים אלו. ודע, כי הנה הרשעים אחר מיתתם, נכנסים בגיהנם,
 ומקבלים שם עונשם, ומתכפר להם. ומשפטם י"ב חדש.

Sha'ar HaGilgulim, introduction 22

There is almost no person on earth that is spared such transmigration. The wicked, after their death, enter Purgatory (*gehinom*) and receive their punishment and atonement there. Their judgement there lasts twelve months.

Although the Arizal uses the term “punishment,” it is important to remember that the suffering the soul endures in *gehinom* (and in being reincarnated) is meant to “scour” or purify it from the spiritual filth that it accrued during its lifetime by transgressing the commandments of the Torah. This purification process enables it to progress afterwards to higher levels of afterlife. Thus, the “punishment” is an expression of G-d’s mercy, an opportunity for the soul to rid itself of the existential “encrustation” of sin that prevents it from experiencing the higher levels of spirituality that await it in reward for the good it performed during its lifetime.

The suffering of the soul in *gehinom* can be alleviated by someone saying *kaddish* for it. This is why the custom is to say *kaddish* for only eleven months after the person’s death: saying *kaddish* the full twelve months would imply that the individual was a completely wicked and requires the full term of purification in *gehinom*.

ויש רשעים שכתוב בהם ואת נפש אויבך יקלענה בתוך כף הקלע, ואינם זוכים ליכנס לגיהנם אחר פטירתם
 למרק עונם, אמנם נפשם הולכת מדחי אל דחי בגלגולים משונים, עד ימרק ענשו קצת ויוכל ליכנס אח"כ
 בגיהנם י"ב חדש להתכפר לגמרי.

To certain wicked people, however, is applied the verse, “He will fling away the lives of your enemies in the hollow of the sling.”² They do not merit entering Purgatory immediately after their death in order to be cleansed of their sin. Rather, their soul descends from level to level through various incarnations, until their sins have been scoured away sufficiently so that they may enter then Purgatory for twelve months and attain full atonement.

The punishment of “the hollow of the sling” (*kaf ha-kela*) is here defined as reincarnation. It is taught that the way a person can avoid this experience is by, during his lifetime, spending as much of the day as possible in reciting passages from the Mishneh, the *Tanya*, and Psalms by heart.³

ולאלו אין זמן קצוב, כי לפעמים ילכו בגלגולים ההם עשרים שנים, או מאה, או אלף, והכל תלוי כפי ערך
 העונות שעשה בתחלה בעה"ז.

There is no set time for these cases, for sometimes a soul can progress through its incarnations in twenty years, or a hundred, or a thousand—all depending upon the seriousness of the sins that it committed in this world.

אמנם הצדיקים ות"ת, אין אור של גיהנם שולטת בהם...ולכן הם צריכים להתגלגל בעה"ז למרק איזה חטא אשר

2. 1 Samuel 25:29.

3. *HaYom Yom*, 7 Tevet.

להם, כי אדם אין צדיק בארץ אשר יעשה טוב ולא יחטא,

In contrast, the fire of Purgatory does not singe the souls of the righteous and Torah scholars.... Therefore, they must be reincarnated into this world in order to scour them from whatever sins they may have done, for there is no one that has not committed some sin.

Thus, for the righteous, reincarnation is the lighter purification process, after which they enter paradise directly. For the wicked, however, reincarnation entails more suffering, and only after finishing the reincarnation process can he proceed to *gehinom*.

והנה, הצדיק אחר פטירתו מן העוה"ז, הוא מוכן לעלות במדרגה במעלות גדולות בעוה"ב, אבל לא בפעם אחד, האמנם תכף אחר פטירתו יענישוהו, למרק העונות היותר חמורים אשר לו, ואז יכניסוהו במחיצה אחת במעלה, ובהגיע תור עלייתו למחיצה יותר עליונה, יחזירוהו להענישו למרק החטאים היותר קלים מן הראשונים, ואז יעלה במדרגה שנית יותר עליונה, אח"כ יחזרו להענישוהו עוד על דקדוקי מצות שהם כחוט השערה...ואז יעלוהו במחיצתו האמיתית הראוייה אליו....

When a righteous person dies, he is thus ready to ascend the ladder of sublime levels of paradise, but this does not happen all at once. Rather, immediately after his death he is subjected to suffering in order to cleanse him of his more serious sins. Only after this is he brought into his first level of paradise. When his turn comes to ascend to a higher, more sublime level, he is again subjected to suffering in order to cleanse him of his more subtle sins. He can then enter his second, higher level of paradise. After this, he is again subjected to suffering in order to cleanse him of the sin of transgressing the minor details of *mitzvah*-performance.... Then he is ushered into his true, fitting place in paradise....

Rabbi Chaim Vital, who is writing these teachings of his master, the Arizal, now relates the following incident:

וכבר כמה פעמים הייתי עם מורי ז"ל הולך בשדה, והיה אומר לי, הנה איש אחד הנקרא בשם כך, והוא צדיק ות"ח, ולסבת עון אחד פלוני שעשה בחייו, הוא עתה מתגלגל תוך אבן זה, או צומח זה, וכיוצא בו, וכמו שיתבאר לקמן. ומעולם לא הכיר בו מורי ז"ל, והיינו חוקרים אחר הנפטר ההוא, ומצאנו דבריו כנים ואמיתיים ואין להאריך בדברים אלו, כי לא יכלם ספר.

It happened a few times that I was walking in the field with my teacher, may his memory be for a blessing, and he said to me: Behold, there was a certain person, named so-and-so, who was a *tzadik* and a Torah scholar, but because he committed such-and-such a sin during his lifetime, he is now incarnated into this stone, or this plant, etc. My teacher, of blessed memory, never knew these people, and we his students would investigate the history of these departed souls, and we invariably found the facts to be in accordance with his words. I am not going to go into this at length, because I could never recount all the times this happened.

ולפעמים היה מסתכל מרחוק ת"ק אמה בקבר אחד, שבין עשרים אלף קברים אחרים, והיה רואה נפש המת הנקבר שם עומד על הקבר ההוא, והיה אומר לנו הקבר ההוא קבור בו איש פלוני ושמו פלוני, ומענישים אותו עונש פלוני, על עון פלוני. והיינו חוקרים על האיש ההוא, ומצאנו דבריו אמתיים, וכאלה רבות וגדולות לא יכילם רעיון:

Other times he would gaze at a grave five hundred cubits away, amongst twenty-thousand other graves, and he would see the soul of the person buried there standing on the grave. He would tell us that so-and-so is buried in that grave, and he is undergoing such-and-such a punishment for having committed such-and-such a sin. We would inquire after this person, and always find it to be as my teacher said. We were witness to many amazing things like this.

ונחזור אל הדרוש שלנו, כי הנה אחר פטירת האדם, נפרעים ממנו על חטאתיו, קודם שיכניסוהו בגיהנם, בהרבה מציאות של עונש, וכלם נקראים גלגולים. רוצה לומר, כי יתגלגל או בדומם, או בצומח, או בחי, או במדבר. וכמעט רוב בני האדם לא ימלטו מלהתגלגל בגלגולים אלה. והטעם הוא, כי אינו יכול לקבל ענשו, עד שיהיה מוגשם בגוף ונפש, ואז בהתגלגלו שם, סובל ומרגיש הצער ההוא, ועיי"כ מתכפרים עונותיו.

To return to our discussion: After an individual dies, he is repaid for his sins in various forms of reincarnation before he enters Purgatory. That is, he can be reincarnated in an inanimate object, a plant, an animal, or in a person. Almost no one can avoid being reincarnated, since a soul cannot experience the suffering required to cleanse him of the effects of his sin unless he has become re-materialized in a soul-body combination. Only then, having been reincarnated, can he suffer and feel the pain and thus achieve atonement.

ואמנם כפי ערך חטא האדם, כך בחי' אופני גלגולו, אם בצומח, אם בכי"ח וכו'. ולכן אפילו הצדיקים ות"ח, יש קצתם אשר מתגלגלים ע"ד הנז"ל, מחמת שבחייהם בא לידם איזה עון....

The degree and extent of the reincarnation—i.e., into which “kingdom” he is reincarnated—is a function of the seriousness of his sins. This is why there are even some *tzadikim* and Torah scholars that undergo reincarnation, as we have said, on account of some sin that they stumbled over during their lifetimes....

הנה נתבאר אצלינו, כי כל העולמות כלם, נבראו מברורי אותם ז' מלכים שמלכו בארץ אדום אשר מתו, והיותר זך הוברר בעולם האצילות, ואחריו הוברר לצורך עולם הבריאה, ואחריו ליצירה, ואחריו לעשיה. והיותר זך שבעשיה, הוא האדם. והוברר תחלה, ואחריו בי"ח בלי מדבר, ואחריו הצומח, ואחריו הדומם. ואמנם הצדיק עיי" מעשיו, ועיי" המצות שעושה באכילתו וכיוצא, יש כח לברור עוד מחלק הדומם, להעלותו אל הצומח, ואל החי, ואל האדם....

We have explained elsewhere that all the worlds were created from the ruins of the seven primordial kings that ruled in the land of Edom and then died i.e., the world of *Tohu* that collapsed. The purest remains of this world were absorbed into the world of *Atzilut*; what was too coarse to be absorbed into *Atzilut* was absorbed into the world of *Beriah*, then *Yetzirah*, and finally *Asiyah*. The purest elements that descended to *Asiyah* were absorbed into the human kingdom, followed by the animal kingdom, the vegetable kingdom, and finally the mineral kingdom. A righteous person, through his deeds and the *mitzvot* he performs through eating and such, has the power to elevate the sparks of holiness in the mineral kingdom to the level of the vegetable kingdom, and then to the level of the animal kingdom, and finally to the level of the human kingdom.

ואמנם הרשע עיי" מעשיו, גורם להפך שמורידים ולא מעלים, ויש מיני עונות שגורמים שחלק האדם ירד עד

בחי' הדומם, ויש עד הצומח, ויש עד החי בלי מדבר. ולכן כנגד זה, יש רשע שאחר מותו מתגלגל באבן דומם, כפי מה שחטא בחייו, ויש רשע שמתגלגל בצומח ויש שמתגלגל בבעלי חיים....

The wicked person, in contrast, through his deeds, causes the exact opposite to happen—he causes the sparks of holiness to descend. Some sins cause the sparks of holiness in man to descend to the level of the inanimate kingdom; others, to the level of the vegetable kingdom or animal kingdom. Therefore, in correspondence to their sin, some wicked people after their death are reincarnated into a stone, while others are reincarnated into vegetables or animals.

When a person commits a sin, he is betraying the Divine image within him; he is not acting like a human being, who is meant to rule over creation and elevate it to Divinity. He is rather stooping to the level of the object he is committing the sin with, and—at least for the duration of the sin—subjecting himself to its rule over him. This dynamic applies both to *bona fide* sins and subtler forms of submission to the evil inclination, as well.

For example, let's say a person has a sensual urge to eat chocolate cake. It is not Shabbat or any other occasion in whose honor he can justify eating the cake, and he has already eaten his meal, so he cannot justify the indulgence with claims of real hunger. No, the sole motivation for this piece of cake is pure, unadulterated sensual indulgence. Furthermore, this is *glatt* kosher cake, and eating it entails no transgression of waiting between meat and dairy foods, so the indulgence is not a sin *per se*, but just an indulgence. If the person succumbs to his urge and eats the cake, he is demonstrating that—at that moment, at least—he is subservient to the power the cake has over him. He has taken his Divine spark animating him at that moment and brought it down to the level of the cake. He becomes, in effect, not a human-person but a cake-person. Moreover, he has to a certain extent brought the whole level of creation down to this level.

So long as this cakiness and cake-identity remains with him, this individual cannot expect to be admitted to the chambers of paradise, where the delights of this world are insignificant and the soul basks in the glow of the Divine presence. He has, on the contrary, demonstrated that he is “into” much coarser delights. He must therefore be cleansed of this cake-mentality. This is accomplished by being reincarnated into the vegetable kingdom, where he can experience the pain of his soul—which is used to the freedom of expression and movement of a human being—being trapped in vegetable-identity. In other words, he must experience the same descent he put his soul (and the world) through when he ate the cake.

והנה אלו המתגלגלים בגלגולים אלו, יושבים שם זמן קבוע, עד שימרק עונו שגרם לו להתגלגל שם בצומח, וככלות זמנו עולה ומתגלגל בבעל חי, וככלות זמנו עולה ומתגלגל באדם ממש....

Those who undergo these reincarnations remain there for a fixed amount of time, until the sin that caused them to be incarnated into the vegetable kingdom is expunged. When this time is over, they ascend into the animal kingdom; when this time is over they ascend into the human kingdom....

We now return to the passage from *Sefer HaLikutim* with which we began the discussion:

ספר הליקוטים, פרשת בחקתי – המשך

ועכשיו אמר הכתוב, אם בחקותי תלכו וכו', ונתתי גשמיכם בעתם ונתנה הארץ יכולה ועץ השדה יתן פריו, ואז תאכלו ושבעתם, ויעלו הנפשות הטבועים ומעורבים בתוכם, למדריגת אדם.

Sefer HaLikutim, parashat Bechukotai, continued

Thus, the Torah says: “If you will follow My laws and faithfully observe My

commandments, I will grant your rains in their season, so that the earth shall yield its produce and the trees of the field their fruit." You will eat and be satisfied, and the souls that are present within the food will ascend to your level.

The ascent of the souls incarnated in the food a person eats is subject to him following G-d's laws and faithfully observing His commandments. That is, he must preserve his Divine level while engaged in eating. Otherwise, as we said, he does not elevate the Divine sparks or souls within the food, but falls to its level.

ו"ש ואכלתם לחמכם לשובע וישבתם לבטח בארצכם, והמשכיל יבין.

This is the mystical meaning of the verse: "And you shall eat your bread to satiation, and dwell securely in your land."⁴

והנה לא כל שעה הוא זמן המגולגלים לעלות, כי לכל זמן ועת לכל חפץ.

Now, the souls reincarnated in lower forms of life do not ascend at all times. Rather, there is a proper time for each ascent to occur.

והענין, כי מי שנתגלגל בדומם אינו מתגלגל בצומח, רק בדי' חדשים, שהם אב אלול תשרי חשוון. ומצומח לבעל חי, ניסן אייר סיון תמוז...ומבעל חי למדבר, כסלו טבת שבט אדר.

Specifically, someone who has been reincarnated into the mineral kingdom only ascends into the vegetable kingdom during the four months of Av, Elul, Tishrei, and Cheshvan. Someone who has been reincarnated into the vegetable kingdom only ascends into the animal kingdom during the four months of Nisan, Iyar, Sivan, and Tamuz.... One ascends from the animal kingdom to the human level during Kislev, Tevet, Shevat, and Adar.

4. Leviticus 26:5.