**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

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**Topics in Hashkafa**

**Rav Assaf Bednarsh**

**Shiur *#*14*: Olam Ha-ba* 3**

**Why is *Olam Ha-ba* Not Mentioned in the Torah?**

Adapted by Leora Bednarsh

All Jewish philosophers agree that the ultimate reward is *Olam Ha-ba*, the afterlife of the World to Come. It is exceedingly puzzling, then, that this reward is not mentioned anywhere in the Written Torah. The Torah does promise great reward to those who keep its commandments, but that reward is earthly and physical, including military and economic success, long life and good health, and other material rewards. Why is the ultimate reward never mentioned explicitly in the Torah?

**Technical Answers**

Numerous answers have been given to this question by Jewish philosophers throughout the ages,[[1]](#footnote-1) and we will survey some of them.

One group of answers is technical, relating not to the substance of *Olam Ha-ba*, but to whether it is necessary for the Torah to teach about it. For example, Rav Saadia Gaon[[2]](#footnote-2) and Ramban[[3]](#footnote-3) explain that one can logically deduce the existence of the afterlife from the nature of the human soul, which is not subject to physical destruction; but one cannot philosophically prove that God will grant material reward to the righteous. Therefore, the Torah elaborates on those rewards which we would not have known on our own and omits that which can be discovered through philosophy.

Rav Hai Gaon[[4]](#footnote-4) explains similarly that at the time the Torah was given, the Jews had a long-standing tradition of belief in the afterlife, and it was not necessary to reinforce that belief.

A very different approach is given by ibn Ezra,[[5]](#footnote-5) who explains that the Torah was given to the entire Jewish people, and therefore only includes ideas which are understandable to the masses. Physical rewards are easily understood by everyone, but the idea of *Olam Ha-ba* is very difficult to grasp, and it is therefore hinted at in the Torah, but not discussed explicitly.

*Keli Yakar* mentions another technical explanation as well, which is that God knew that there would be those who would doubt the veracity of the Torah. If the Torah had focused on reward and punishment in a future world, cynics would have concluded that the Torah promises things that we can never verify or see with our own eyes because there is in fact no reward or punishment. To counter this mistaken belief, the Torah promises concrete rewards and punishments that we can verify by looking at history, so that all Jews would be able to believe in the Torah.

**Historical Answers**

*Chovot Ha-levavot*[[6]](#footnote-6) adds a historical dimension to the explanation quoted above from ibn Ezra. He explains that when the Jews first received the Torah, they were intellectually unsophisticated and spiritually immature. If the ultimate reward promised in the Torah had been something they could not appreciate, they would never have accepted the commitment to observe the Torah, and the religion would not have gotten off the ground. Therefore, God only explicitly promises material rewards, which the people could easily relate to and which would spur them to spiritual growth. As the Jews have developed spiritually, they have become able to derive the promise of an afterlife from the hints scattered throughout the Torah and accept that belief as well.

Rav Saadia Gaon also suggests a historical answer, which is that the nature of prophecy is to focus on that information which is immediately necessary. When the Jews received the Torah, the upcoming challenge was conquest and settlement of the Land of Israel. Therefore, the Torah focuses only on those rewards and punishments which relate to the quality of their national existence in the Land of Israel, which are earthly, not other-worldly.

Another fascinating historical explanation is given by Abarbanel, who explains that when the Torah was given, the Jews were soon to be tempted by the pagan beliefs of the Canaanites, who believed that worship of the local gods brought fertility, health, military victory and other forms of material success. The Canaanites did not, however, believe that their deities promised an afterlife. Therefore, it was not necessary to focus on the afterlife, because there was no temptation to worship any other forces in order to merit an afterlife. Rather, it was necessary for the Torah to teach that the Jews should not worship the Canaanite gods in order to achieve fertility and other material success, because only worship of the true God would merit material blessing, and idol worship would be punished with physical destruction.

Of course, all these explanations agree that God does include the belief in *Olam Ha-ba* in the Torah; but He does so by means of hints which would be elucidated by the Sages, using the traditional methods of exegetical interpretation, as we find in the Midrash and Gemara.[[7]](#footnote-7) These philosophers are merely explaining why the doctrine of the afterlife is not mentioned explicitly in the Written Torah.[[8]](#footnote-8)

**SUBSTANTIVE EXPLANATIONS**

**Abarbanel: *Avoda Lishma***

Many Jewish philosophers have suggested more substantive answers to this problem which relate to the nature and purpose of the afterlife and of the Torah itself. Abarbanel quotes the opinion of Rambam[[9]](#footnote-9) that we are not supposed to keep the commandments in order to receive the material rewards promised by the Torah. That would constitute *avoda she-lo lishma*, serving God for ulterior motives. The intention of the Torah, when it mentions material rewards, is to promise that if we fulfill the commandments, God will make it easier for us to fulfill more commandments and learn more Torah, by freeing us from oppression, illness, and poverty.

Based on this, Abarbanel explains that the Torah does not mention reward or punishment in the afterlife because we should not be serving God for the sake of reward. The Torah only mentions material consequences in this world because they are not intended as rewards, but rather as opportunities for further service of God. One should serve God with the goal of expanding and deepening one’s service of God, not with the goal of reaping personal benefit. True reward and punishment, therefore, is purposely omitted from the Torah in order to teach us the philosophical principle that one should serve God out of pure motives, not for personal gain.

***Sefer Ha-ikkarim:* Collective Reward**

*Sefer Ha-ikkarim* suggests another philosophical explanation, pointing out that the Torah focuses on the collective reward and punishment of the Jewish people, as opposed to the individual.[[10]](#footnote-10) Therefore, the Torah does not mention reward and punishment in the afterlife, because in the afterlife, each individual is judged independently and there is no collective reward or punishment. In this world, however, physical success is granted to a righteous nation even if some of its members are wicked, and they naturally share in the success and prosperity of their nation. Likewise, physical punishment will be meted out to a wicked nation, and even the righteous amongst them will necessarily suffer along with their compatriots. The Torah mentions only this-worldly reward and punishment, then, in order to restrict its focus to the Jewish collective.

According to the *Sefer Ha-ikkarim*, it emerges that the Torah is willing to omit explicit mention of one of the principles of Jewish faith in order to avoid focusing on the individual as opposed to the nation. This is understandable in the context of a particular conception of the nature of the Torah. The Torah is not a covenant between God and any individual, but rather between God and the Jewish people as a whole. A Jew is obligated in six hundred and thirteen commandments, unlike a Noahide, not because of his individual worthiness, but because he is a member of the people who enter into a covenant with God at Mount Sinai and receive the Torah. It is no wonder, then, that the Torah is replete with promises of national success and prosperity, as well as threats of national defeat and exile. A focus on individual reward and punishment would undermine the very nature of the Torah.

**Maharal: Focus on the Physical World**

An alternative, and perhaps even more fundamental, philosophical explanation is suggested by the Maharal.[[11]](#footnote-11) He explains that the purpose of the Torah is not to teach about the heavenly realms, but to perfect the physical world. The Torah contains all the instructions necessary for bringing this world to perfection, and the rewards mentioned in the Torah constitute part of the plan for perfecting this world. If we perfect ourselves by keeping the *mitzvot*, this will improve the world not only ethically, morally and spiritually, but even medically, agriculturally and economically. The Torah mentions only the salutary effects of *mitzvot* in this world, because the purpose of the Torah is to improve this world. Since *Olam Ha-ba* is already perfect, and needs no further improvement, the Torah omits any mention of it. The Torah does not aim to teach us what rewards we will earn by keeping its commandments, but rather what we can improve and perfect by means of those commandments, and this task is relevant only in this world.

According to the Maharal, the Torah is specifically a this-worldly document, not because this world is greater that the next world, but rather because this world is flawed and imperfect. While the greatest reward for a human being may be the eternal bliss of *Olam Ha-ba*¸ the greatest achievement of the Torah is not to bring us to *Olam Ha-ba* but to bring Godliness and spirituality into this imperfect world.

**Summary**

We have elucidated several different explanations suggested for the Torah’s omission of the doctrine of *Olam Ha-ba*. Some are technical: the existence of *Olam Ha-ba* is philosophically obvious or was already well known. Alternatively, perhaps the concept is too difficult for the masses to understand; or maybe the Torah wants to promise verifiable rewards which would prove the veracity of the Torah to the residents of this world.

Others give historical explanations, such as that the generation which received the Torah was not sophisticated enough to understand the value of *Olam Ha-ba*, or that their immediate need was to learn principles relevant to national life in the Land of Israel. Alternatively, for polemical reasons, the Torah focuses on those benefits which were promised by the competing pagan religions.

We concluded with three explanations which take this philosophical difficulty and used it to derive a deeper insight into the nature of the Torah. The omission of explicit mention of *Olam Ha-ba* in the Torah, according to Abarbanel, comes to emphasize that we must keep the Torah for its own sake and not in order to earn reward. According to *Sefer Ha-ikkarim*, it is to teach us that the covenant with God is collective and not individualistic. Finally, according to Maharal, it is to teach us that the purpose of the Torah is not to transcend this world and escape to a perfect spiritual realm, but rather to bring spirituality and perfection into this physical world.

1. Many Jewish philosophers even compile lists of solutions to this problem, including: *Chovot Ha-levavot* (*Shaar Ha-bitachon,* Chapter 4), *Sefer Ha-ikkarim* (Book 4, Chapters 39-40), Abarbanel (*Vayikra* 26:3), Maharal (*Tiferet Yisrael,* Chapters 57-58), and *Keli Yakar* (*Vayikra* 26:12) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Emunot Ve-de’ot,* Chapter 9 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *Shemot* 6:2 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Quoted by ibn Ezra, *Devarim* 32:39. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *Devarim* 32:39. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *Shaar Ha-bitachon,* Chapter 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. E.g., *Sanhedrin* 90b-92a, *Kiddushin* 39b. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. One might extrapolate from some of these explanations that in general, the simple meaning of the Written Torah relates to those messages which are historically necessary in the generation of the Exodus from Egypt and the settlement of the Land of Israel, while those philosophical concepts which are more relevant for future generations are hinted at in the Torah, to be derived by means of the traditional methods of biblical exegesis. This insight may be useful for explaining other examples of philosophical beliefs found in the *Torah she-be’al Peh* (Oral Torah) which are not explicated in the Written Torah. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. *Mishneh Torah*, *Hilkhot Teshuva,* Chapter 10; *Hilkhot Melakhim* 12:4-5. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. In a few places, such as concerning the commandments of honoring parents and of sending away the mother bird (*Devarim* 22:7), the Torah does speak of reward for the individual who keeps the commandments. *Sefer Ha-ikkarim* points out, however, that specifically in these two places, *Chazal* find a reference to *Olam Ha-ba* (*Kiddushin* 39b, *Chullin* 142a), thus bolstering the connection between the afterlife and individualism. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. *Tiferet Yisrael,* Chapter 57. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)