



## TOWARDS MEANINGFUL

### TEFILLA

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## וְהִיא אִם שָׁמַע

**T**he kids in the sixth grade class were celebrating a monumental occasion.

*They had just finished learning their first masechet of Gemara! They had put in hours of study and hard work and their efforts had truly paid off! The learning had both energized and inspired them. They couldn't wait to get started on the next masechet. At their class siyum, their Rebbe got up and presented them with a special prize for their accomplishment. Which of the following would be the more appropriate present – tickets to the local movie theater or beautifully bound personalized siddurim?*

I would venture to say that most of you probably opted for the latter. A spiritual action deserves a spiritual reward, not a physical one! And yet we find just the opposite in the second paragraph of Shema. In the paragraph of וְהִיא אִם שָׁמַע we describe the reward one receives for following Hashem's mitzvot and on the flip side, the punishment one receives for straying from Him. If we do the mitzvot, Hashem will give us all the material sustenance we could ask for – plenty of rain, bountiful crops, and a feeling of complete satiation. If we stray from Hashem, then the result will be the opposite – no rain, no crops, and

galut (exile). This is truly perplexing. We've worked so hard to succeed spiritually, to create a real relationship with HaKadosh Baruch Hu and to do His Mitzvot and He rewards us with full stomachs?! Doesn't that seem inappropriate? Wouldn't we expect a more spiritual compensation; Perhaps Olam HaBa (the World to Come) would be a more fitting reward?

The first answer is that yes, obviously we will be rewarded for all of our Mitzvot in Olam HaBa. That will be the ultimate reward. But we weren't put here in this world to focus only on the next. We need to live our lives to the fullest in this world, to enjoy the beauty around us, and to use it to serve Hashem, not because we want to earn a ticket into the next world but because we want to create a relationship with Him here and now in *this* world. This is also why there is absolutely no mention of Olam HaBa in the Torah and it is not majorly emphasized in Jewish literature.

The second answer is brought down by the Seforno (Devarim 11:13). He writes that these so-called rewards are really just the natural consequences of our actions. Hashem leads us in the way we want to be led. Therefore, if He sees we are trying to keep His commandments, He will make things easier for us (ie. - make sure we have rain, food to eat etc.) so we have the strength to continue keeping His commandments.

But if He sees we are purposely transgressing His commandments, He will make things harder for us (no rain, no food, etc) so that it is easier for us to continue sinning.

The material rewards here are not the ends, but the means. When we fulfill the mitzvot, Hashem gives us the material sustenance that we need in order to be free to do even more mitzvot. This, of course, is a very important message for us to remind ourselves of, every morning as we recite the Shema. When we look around and see all the good that has been granted to us, we need to take stock and realize that Hashem is giving those things to us as a “reward”; He is granting us the ability to serve Him with ease. Let’s take advantage and use all we have been given to enable us to create a real and meaningful relationship with HaKadosh Baruch Hu. ■



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