



Parashat Ki-Tavo includes the section commonly known as the *tokhecha* (literally, "reproof"), the long description of the harsh punishments God threatens to visit upon *Benei Yisrael* should they breach their covenant with Him (28:15-69). In the middle of this section we find a pair of verses which, according to Maimonides, expresses the fundamental purpose underlying divine retribution: "Because you did not serve the Lord your God amidst joy and good-heartedness, out of abundance of everything, you shall serve your enemies...in hunger, thirst, nakedness and lacking of everything" (28:47-48).

Maimonides cites these verses amidst his discussion of the doctrine of reward and punishment, in *Hilkhot Teshuva* (9:1):

If we willingly abandon the Torah and [instead] occupy ourselves with the vanities of the time, similar to what is said (Devarim 32:15), "Jeshurun grew corpulent and rebelled," the True Judge will deny the defectors all the goodness of this world which encouraged them to rebel, and will bring upon them all the evils that prevent them from acquiring the world to come, so that they will be destroyed in their sinfulness. This is what is written in the Torah, "Because you did not serve the Lord...you will serve your enemies..."...Meaning, if you served God out of joy and followed His path, He will bestow upon you these blessings and distance the curses from you, to the point where you will be free to become wise in Torah and engage in it so that you earn life in the next world...But if you abandon God and indulge in food, drink, lust and the like, He will bring upon you all these curses and remove the blessings...and your mind will not be free, nor your body able, to perform the commandments.

God bestows upon us "joy," "good-heartedness" and "abundance of everything" for the purpose of allowing us to focus our attention on Torah and *mitzvot*, to increase our knowledge and refine our characters. Comfort and security afford one the time and peace of mind to pursue spiritual greatness, unencumbered by the pain or pressures experienced by those suffering illness, poverty or persecution. But if a person instead utilizes the comforts and luxuries of life to disregard God and his religious duties, God threatens to remove these assets and thereby deny him the ability to pursue spiritual excellence. If health and success lead one to indulge in "the vanities of the world" rather than in wisdom and virtue, he is liable to forfeit those blessings which he had misused.

During the period from Rosh Hashanah through Yom Kippur we add in the daily prayer service the plea, "Remember us for life, O King who desires life, and inscribe us in the book of life – for Your sake, O living God." Some have explained that the final clause of this petition – "for Your sake, O living God" – is intended as a description of the kind of "life" for which we beseech God at the onset of the new year. We ask for life

– and all the blessings of life – for His sake, so-to-speak, to enable us to excel in the service of God. We appeal for health, stability and success not so that we can simply enjoy and indulge, but rather so that we can, in Maimonides' words, "become wise in Torah and engage in it," and thereby bring ourselves and the world closer to perfection, and earn our eternal share in the world to come.