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Our Bat Mitzvah Rebecca taught beautifully today about reward and punishment. The Torah says: If you do something right, you get a reward. If you do something wrong, you get punished. But Rebecca showed us that it is a bit more complex than that.

In fact, if you are an ancient Israelite, grappling with what God demands of you, it really gets complex when you try to do something right and God meddles by punishing you in order to test your loyalty.

Moses tells the Israelites:

. . . God made you travel in the wilderness . . . so that God might test you by hardships to learn what was in your hearts; whether you would keep God's commandments or not. (Deut. 8:2-3)

I don't know about you, but I find this really difficult to understand.

Why would God toy with us like that? And manipulate human beings?

Does God justify our suffering so that we can prove our faithfulness?

And all of this is in the Torah.

I am uncomfortable and unsatisfied with the idea of human beings being tested at God's whim. Doesn't God have better things to do than manipulate us so that we demonstrate loyalty?

The world is a very difficult place right now. How can we see a consistent thread between cause and effect when it comes to evil in

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the world? Bad things happen to good people and yes, bad people get away with murder. In her own words, Rebecca offered a profound question, “Is reward and punishment really true?”

From St. Louis, MO., to Gaza, from our own American border, to Tiburon, where we lost a master of human emotion who moved us to laughter and to tears, the tragic loss of Robin Williams, we know that bad things happen.

In trying to reconcile reward and punishment of the Torah with what we know about life, for today’s purposes, I turned to, what else? a Yiddish proverb: *Der mentsch trakht un Got lakht*. A person plans and God laughs. It is completely *hutzpadikh*, cheeky, isn’t it, that we plan at all? We might have the illusion that we can plan, but experience often tells us otherwise.

In the words of the marvelous columnist from the Jewish Forward, Philologos: “The thought of God gently laughing on His heavenly throne at our vain dreams rather than sternly redirecting them like a traffic policeman makes God seem — well, so much more human.”

In fact, God may feel that some of His plans have not gone as God wanted. And Rabbi Sherre Hirsch points out that perhaps we were laughing at God. Adam and Eve had only one rule, and they broke it.

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Cain killed Abel. The Israelites begged to return to Egypt. And Moses, he broke the first set of the Ten Commandments. God plans, maybe we laugh.

Humor is one tool we use to grapple with what we don't understand in the world. But Rebecca pointed out another: understanding the internal reward. A midrash asks: "What does the name of today's Torah portion, Ekev, mean? Does Ekev mean that as a consequence of doing the right thing, you will get a reward?" Maybe.

The Israelites say to God: "When are we going to see our reward for all these commandments that we have done?" God replies, "Everything you do now that is right in the eyes of God, you experience the reward right now. In your life, you get the reward of having done the right thing; of interacting with the human being in front of you. God says, "Don't worry about the reward in the future. You don't know enough about that now. This is your reality now: focus on the internal reward that lies inside you. This is your reality now.

And in the words of the late Robin Williams, who wasn't Jewish, but had a Jewish soul, "Reality. . . what a concept." Shabbat Shalom.