

Understanding Messages within our Difficulties and Challenges – Part 1

Introduction

The Torah understanding is that Hashem not only created the world – something – from absolutely nothing, but that He continually sustains and supervises it. And not only does He supervise the big events in the world, He also supervises the details in all of our lives. This naturally leads to a classical question which has been discussed throughout the generations – How much can we understand this *hashgacha pratit* (personal Divine supervision) which occurs in each of our lives? Before addressing this very significant issue concerning *hashgacha pratit*, there are three important prerequisites which need to be clarified.

First – Concerning the central concept of *bitachon* (trust in G-d), the *Chazon Ish* (*Emunah v'Bitachon* 2:1) wrote:

There is an old misconception rooted in the hearts of many when it comes to the concept of *bitachon* (trust in G-d)... This fundamental trait has come to be understood as the obligation to believe that whichever result seems most beneficial to us is the one that must occur. And if one is unsure and concerned that the other possibility may happen, then this person must be lacking in *bitachon*.

This understanding of *bitachon* is wrong...for who can know the judgments of G-d and how He relates to us? Rather, *bitachon* means the clarity that nothing happens by chance – everything that occurs in this world is the result of a decree from G-d... While there are many different levels and gradations to *bitachon* [and] it is natural to be afraid when encountering a dangerous situation...included within *bitachon* is to remain steadfast in one's *emunah* (belief in G-d) even when one considers the possibility of *yissurim* (painful difficulties and challenges). One's heart remains aware that this difficulty is not random, since there is no randomness at all in the world, and everything is exclusively from G-d

According to this, *emunah* (belief in G-d) and *bitachon* (trust in G-d) are one and the same. *Emunah* is the general perspective of the believer, i.e., the theory, and *bitachon* is its application.

The **Pele Yo'etz** (*Erech Havtacha*) says similarly:

Bitachon does not mean that G-d does everything which a person wants and that nothing difficult will ever happen to him. We see this in the *tzadikim* (righteous) who are poor and afflicted with severe suffering, and in the many difficult things that continually happen in the world. The essence of *bitachon* is, rather, that whatever happens is for the good and that Heaven sees the good in what is happening to a person. Man has very limited understanding of what happens and will perceive bad as being good and good as being bad. Only G-d knows what is truly good to be able to serve G-d and to achieve completeness. Therefore [*bitachon* means that], all that happens to a person should be accepted wholeheartedly with gladness, and one should have *emunah* in G-d that only good comes from Heaven, never bad.

Second – Not only do we need to know that everything that occurs in this world is the result of a decree from G-d, but both the Ramban and Rabbeinu Bachye held that everyone is required to believe in *hashgacha pratit*.

The **Ramban** (Introduction to *Iyov*) wrote:

It is obvious and well-known that the belief in G-d's knowledge about the precise details of each being, as well as His supervision of them in general and particular, is a major principle in Judaism. Whoever rejects this principle completely rejects the Torah.

Rabbeinu Bachye (*Kad HaKemach – Emunah*) said:

The essence of the Torah and the *mitzvot* is *emunah*... This mitzvah, which depends upon thought, is to believe that the world has a single Creator, [and] that He supervises mankind.

Third – We need to be *matzduk hadin al kol m'orotav* – to acknowledge G-d's justice in all that befalls us. The **Orchot Tzadikim** (*Sha'ar HaSimcha*) actually counts this as one of the 613 *mitzvot*, based on the verse (*Devarim* 8:5):

“*v'yadata im l'vavecha, ki ka'asher y'yaseir ish et b'no, Hashem Elokecha m'yasreka* – And you should know with your heart, that just like a parent gives *yissurim* to his child, G-d your L-rd gives you *yissurim*.”

This verse clearly shows the problem with the common translation of the word “*yissurim*” as “suffering.” It would be absurd to translate this verse as – “Just as a parent causes his child to suffer, similarly does G-d your L-rd cause you to suffer!” While there may be no single English-word translation for *yissurim*, this verse provides the proper context for us to understand it. *Yissurim*, therefore must mean – pain, challenges, and difficulties (what could be called “tough love”) that were given to us from G-d's love, and exclusively for our benefit.

Sources that discuss how we can understand *Hashgacha*

With these three prerequisites in mind, we can now begin to discuss *hashgacha pratit*. The obvious first source is the well-known *Gemara Brachot* (5a):

“If one sees *yissurim* coming upon him – *yefashpeish b'ma'asav* (he should examine his actions)...

[If he was] *pishpeish* but didn't find – he should assume that it was because of *bitul Torah* (neglect of Torah learning)...

And if he did assume [that it was because of *bitul Torah*] but [still] didn't find anything, it is clear that they must be *yissurim shel ahava* (afflictions of love).”

The simple message seems to be – not only is *hashgacha pratit* relevant for every single person, but the ability to understand and interpret this *hashgacha pratit*, that specifically occurred to us, is also relevant for every single person.

The **Nefesh HaChaim** (4:29) explains this *gemara*:

“If one sees *yissurim* coming upon him – *yefashpeish b'ma'asav* (he should examine his actions)...

This is because G-d relates to us with the principle of *mida k'neged mida* (measure for measure) – the actual limb that was corrupted through transgressing is the very limb that *yissurim* came upon.

[Through this examination and introspection] one will then come to know and understand which [specific] transgression these *yissurim* correspond to. One will then take it to heart to admit and abandon it, and thereby be healed. Therefore it says – “If one sees *yissurim* coming upon him – *yefashpeish b'ma'asav* (he should examine his actions)” – and through the *yissurim* he will understand his path.

The *gemara* then goes on to say – “If he searched but didn't find” – i.e., a transgression done by that limb, in this particular manner, that would have appropriately led to these specific *yissurim* to have come upon him through *mida k'neged mida*, then he should “assume that it was because of *bitul Torah*.” This is because *mida k'neged mida* is not relevant to *bitul Torah*, since *bitul Torah* could impact any limb in the entire body.

Rav Avraham Grodzinsky, the *Mashgiach* of Slobodka, explained *yissurim* by comparing them to *nevuah* (prophecy), in his work, the **Torat Avraham**:

The purpose of *nevuah* is never to give us new information or clarity regarding Torah, but rather to give us clarity about the nature of reality. Even those who want to observe the Torah can be confused as to how well they are following it. Yeshaya, for example, chastises the people for not bringing *korbanot* (offerings) properly, and in their observance of *Shabbat* and *Yom Tov* (holidays).

This leads to a very obvious question – If *nevuah* was so valuable in the past, when people were so much greater, what are all of the generations supposed to do afterwards, with neither *nevuah* nor *ruach hakodesh* (Divine inspiration)?

The answer is that the *hashgacha* has granted us something to take the place of *nevuah*, and it is *yissurim*. *Yissurim* are not an *onesh* (punishment) for transgressions that we have already done, but are rather G-d's agents to teach us about our past mistakes and to help us to avoid any additional transgressions in the future, without which, it would be impossible for us to do *teshuva*.

As the *Gemara Brachot* (5a) says – “If a person sees *yissurim* coming upon him, he should examine his actions”... Through the analysis of *mida k'neged mida* we will be able to determine which transgression would have logically caused these *yissurim* to have come upon us. These *yissurim* are very powerful to [help us to] search out and uncover, to analyze and understand the secrets of the heart, even more than a *Navi* (Prophet) of G-d. The *Gemara Megillah* (14a) tells us – “The transfer of the signet ring [from Achashveirosh to Haman which was the prelude to all of the evil decrees that followed against the Jews] was greater than all of the 48 *Nevi'im* (male prophets) and 7 *Nevi'ot* (female prophetesses).” While the *Nevi'im* were **not** successful in getting the Jews to do *teshuva*, the *yissurim* **did** succeed in getting the Jews to do *teshuva*.

If this is true for the community, it is all the more true for every individual – *yissurim* will help them to uncover that which is concealed or that which they aren't paying sufficient attention to, and to do *teshuva*.

There is, however, an obstacle which prevents people from listening to these “*Nevi'im*” and it is called – *m'lumada* (habituation). *M'lumada* is not only a problem with *tefillah* (prayer), *brachot* (blessings), and *mitzvot*; it can also be a concern with our learning of Torah and properly understanding it. In addition to these more spiritual areas, *m'lumada* is also relevant to our feelings and perceptions, and can, therefore limit the impact that *yissurim* will have upon us... We have become so accustomed to life with *yissurim* that we hardly feel them anymore.

This situation of being desensitized to *yissurim* is a major obstacle to growing through the *yissurim*. If we are not only missing *nevuah*, but the *yissurim* that can replace it are also not helping us, how will we ever be aroused to do *teshuva*? The only solution is for us to reawaken our feelings — first with the big things that happen, and eventually with the small everyday occurrences in our lives.

In order to prevent us from making numerous mistakes and committing many transgressions, G-d granted this “*nevuah*” (i.e., *yissurim*) as a *chessed* (kindness) to both the community and the individual, for that time and for all generations.

It would seem that it would be a greater *chessed* for G-d to give us *yissurim* merely as a hint, not as illnesses or great pains, as the *Gemara Arachin* (16b) says –
“How far does *yissurim* extend? Even if one puts his hand into his pocket to take out three coins but only manages to remove two”.

The truth is that *yissurim* do begin with small hints. The *tochacha* (rebuke) in *Parshat Bechukotai* was actually given in five different stages, and only when the initial milder stage was ignored did the next more severe stage begin. The *hashgacha* continued to increase the *yissurim* in order that we would finally listen and improve our ways, since there is no solution for one who is lacking awareness other than to force him to be aware...

An even more obvious aspect of the *chessed* is that the one who is uncovering all of this is the person himself. The actual transgressor is the one who is seeing these secrets of his heart. This whole matter is remarkable – this very transgressor who is now so small and lowly, who doesn't understand G-d's Torah, and isn't listening to the words of the *Nevi'im*, has now become a “*Navi* of G-d.” The **main** point of *nevuah* is to help us understand ourselves so that we will know how to return to the proper path... Since we “become the *Navi*,” and we know ourselves better than anyone else, *yissurim* can be much more accurate than *nevuah* from someone else. **This great power of seeing into the heart is accessible to every single Jew** — not only the greatest people — in what is relevant for themselves.

Rav Wachvogel (*Mashgiach* of Lakewood Yeshiva, in *Leket Reshimot*, pg. 97-101) says similarly from the *Sifri*:

“The verse “*acharei Hashem teileichu* (You should follow after G-d)” refers to the *amud ha’annan* (the pillar of the clouds of Glory), and this is a mitzvah for all generations.” Rebbe Yerucham Levovitch, the *Mashgiach* of the *Mir Yeshiva* in Europe, pointed out the [obvious] difficulty with this – Since the *annan* (clouds of Glory) only existed for the 40 years [in the desert], how could this be a mitzvah for all generations? He explained this as a *mitzvat ase* (positive obligation) for every person to follow after the *hashgacha* from Hashem.

There is *hashgacha* in every generation, and the only difference in the desert was that the *amud ha’anan* was revealed and obvious to all. In every generation, however, there are also *amudei ha’annan*, different *amudei ha’annan* that are [either] hidden or concealed.

Every single Jew, both collectively and individually, has an *amud ha’annan* which appears to him and guides him. He simply needs to search for his *amud ha’annan*. It may seem that it is not so easy to find, since it is hidden, but it definitely does exist!... Whoever merits it will clearly be shown how he needs to act.

If we don't try to see *hashgacha*, then we won't see or experience any *hashgacha*, and we won't even know what *hashgacha* is. If [however] one does try to see *hashgacha*, he will immediately see *hashgacha* – in every single step. This is the principle that – unless you search, you will never see.

Moshe Rabeinu merited everything through stopping to see the [burning] bush. There were many other shepherds of sheep that had passed by, seen the bush burning, and hadn't stopped...

Moshe Rabeinu stopped [to see] because he knew that everything that a person is shown has a purpose... And [since] “G-d saw that he turned to look... G-d [then] spoke to him.”

If one attempts to see *hashgacha*, [then] *hashgacha* will be shown to him. If one [even] pays attention a bit to what happens to him, one will immediately see that this is not a random world. One will see *hashgacha* and G-d's hand all around him even without *ruach hakodesh* or *nevuah*!

The *Gemara Arachin* (16b) asks – “How far does *yissurim* extend?” and concludes – “Even if one stuck his hand into his pocket to take out three coins but only took out two [and now needs “extra effort to put his hand back in and take out the third coin” – Rashi].”

Rav Yisrael Salant (as quoted in the *sefer Sam Derech* #13, *Balak*) explained this according to the *Gemara Brachot* 5a:

“When a person sees *yissurim* coming upon him, he should examine his actions.” Since *yissurim* that come upon a person never impact him for no reason, there must have been some issue that caused him to have them. The *gemara*, therefore, tells us how far *yissurim* extend, so we shouldn't think that we need to examine our deeds only if we have severe *yissurim* like *Iyov*, *Rachmana litzlan* (that G-d should protect us from). Rather, every single aggravation, even a very slight one, needs to awaken us to investigate our actions and to examine what caused these *yissurim* to happen to us.

As the *siddur* of the *Gra* explains – just like the *Avot* (forefathers) related everything back to G-d, we also need to recognize and to see how everything relates back to the Master of the universe. There is, therefore, a great obligation on every person to consider every occurrence, whether small or big, and to ask – “What does G-d want with this?”

This should be *I'zechut ul'illuy nishmat Ruchama Rivka, a"h*, bat Asher Zevulun