

Understanding Messages within our Difficulties and Challenges – Part 2

Sources that question our ability to understand *hashgacha*.

Before speaking about our ability to understand *hashgacha pratit*, the *Chafetz Chaim* (*Sheim Olam* – chapter 3) reaffirms the fundamental principle that:

Every single thing that occurs in this world, from the earth until the heaven, is entirely under the *hashgacha* of G-d. The Rabbis have spoken extensively about the topic of *hashgacha* – “No man stubs his toe below unless it has been decreed upon him from above” (*Chulin 7b*)... A person needs to consider his actions and see the *hashgacha* that has come upon him, and he will thereby strengthen his *bitachon*. And even if the *hashgacha* is not so obvious, for example when one profited because the price for the entire market went up, he should think about his particular relationship to this situation, and then the *hashgacha* will become revealed.

The *Chafetz Chaim* then cautions us regarding the level of clarity we will actually be able to achieve –

A person comes here [to this world] for just a few years, and he wants to understand answers to all of his questions... But the days of a person are extremely brief, and he sees very little of the world and its matters, like a traveler that goes from place to place. He barely recognizes who he himself is and what he is supposed to accomplish. This may be his first time in this world, or perhaps he has already been here many different times, and he has still not completed his task. It is written in the name of the Ari that today virtually all of the souls are *gilgulim* (reincarnations). Since a person's knowledge is so limited, he can't investigate the actions of the King of Kings. A person [therefore] needs to walk with Him with purity, and to have *emunah* that every single thing He does is entirely for the best, since nothing bad comes from above. Then he will certainly merit to see that, in the end, these very things were entirely good and kindness.

Rav Chaim Shmuelevitz (*Sichot Mussar* #18) also spoke about our limitations in understanding our *yissurim* –

“As precious and beneficial as *yissurim* are, in order for one to derive this benefit and to understand them properly, he must have a *Rav*... The most valuable lesson a student could receive from his *Rav* is how to understand *yissurim*.

There are so many different levels and details of pain that may be factored into *yissurim*, both physical as well as spiritual, from the most subtle to the most difficult — how can a person possibly know which ones are coming for which issues?

In addition, when a person does stop to consider the purpose and message of his *yissurim*, he may easily end up understanding them incorrectly... The nature of people is not to see their own failings, and therefore they will twist the *yissurim* to another direction entirely...

The preciousness of *yissurim* is not only that they help us to fix our direction in life, but also that they show us just how much G-d cares about us. As the *Gemara Arachin* 16b says – “One that goes 40 days without *yissurim* has acquired this [temporal] world” – and lost his connection to *Olam Haba* (the world to come).

We see that there are many great and elevated benefits to *yissurim*, but for all of them one needs a *Rav*, to learn from him the Torah of eternal life, the Torah of *yissurim*. And then through the *yissurim*, it will be possible for one to reach all of the exalted levels and life in *Olam Haba*.

The **Mabit** (*Beit Elokim* – *Tefilah* #16) explained that our ability to understand our *yissurim* is limited specifically in our day and age –

“It is well known that when the *Shechina* (Divine Presence) rested on the Jewish people through the *Mishkan* (Tabernacle) or *Beit HaMikdash* (Temple), then *hashgacha*, *nissim* (miracles), and the chosenness of the Jews were openly manifest to everyone... Only those with transgressions

suffered, and once they did *teshuvah* the difficulties stopped. When the *Shechina* departed because of our transgressions, however, then the open *hashgacha* also ceased. *Hashgacha* now occurs only in a hidden manner, both for *s'char* and *onesh* (positive and negative consequences). While the stubborn can now rationalize that they [*s'char* and *onesh*] are not from G-d, the intelligent realize that everything that happens in our exile, in general and in particular, is entirely from G-d's *hashgacha*.

After discussing many possible factors that could be involved with determining the proper *din* (judgment) and *yissurim* that should occur to people, the **Ramchal** (*Derech Hashem* 2:3 – *B'Hashgachah Ha'Ishit*) explains:

“The key point is that the judgment is true and straight, as it says (*Devarim* 32:4) – “*Hatzur tamim pa'alo, ki kol d'rachav mishpat* – The Creator's work is perfect and all His ways are just.” No created thing can encompass G-d's thoughts or the profound depth of His plan... From all of this, we see that there are many different and varied reasons for everything that happens to an individual in this world, whether it is clearly good or not. It is important to realize, however, that this does not mean that every event is always the result of all these causes. These are merely all the possible causes, but things can sometimes result from one and sometimes from another. The Highest Wisdom, however, perceives and knows what is best to rectify the entire creation. The various causes do not always have the same effects. Many different causes are almost always involved, and in many cases will contradict one another... Because of these numerous conflicts, the Highest Wisdom must balance and decide every single factor, creating situations which are products of the various combinations of these causes with respect to each individual.

Occurrences may thus be the result of one or another of these causes, but ultimately at least one of these causes that we have discussed must be involved. The details of this judgment, however, are beyond the grasp of man's understanding. But to know its general concepts and categories is to know much, as we have explained earlier.

Rabbi Yissachar Dov Rubin, in an article on this topic, spelled out why we are so limited in our ability to understand *hashgacha pratit*:

“While each person certainly needs to understand that every single thing that happens to him is *hashgacha pratit*, we still need to ask – how do we know that this is a *siman min haShamayim* (sign from Heaven) to determine how and what we should do?”

And even if we can assume that what happened was a *siman min haShamayim*, do we have the tools in our hands to then determine with a pure heart what exactly this *siman* is telling us? If we encounter resistance to some particular activity, is this an indication from *Shamayim* that we should abandon it? Or perhaps the opposite; this is showing us the importance of the task in line with the principle – “According to the effort is the achievement.”

Let's begin by examining two different incidents that occurred to the **Chafetz Chaim**:

a. While he was involved in compiling the *Mishna Brura*, his son tragically died in an accident that occurred in his home. The *Chafetz Chaim* went to the *beit medrash* (study hall), pounded on the *bima*, and announced publicly – “I know that all of this is *ma'aseh Satan* (the work of the Satan) to try to stop me from the holy work of writing the *Mishna Brura*, and I am, therefore, publicly announcing before the entire congregation that this won't stop me. Nothing will prevent me from my work with this exalted task!”

b. It is known that near the end of his life, the *Chafetz Chaim* decided to make *aliya* to the holy land, and he had (even) arranged a place to live there. Much effort had gone into this since the *Chafetz Chaim* saw many different benefits in this great matter for all of *Klal Yisrael* (the Jewish people) as well as for the residents of *Eretz Yisrael*. And then, near the very end of his preparations, his *Rebbitzen* was taken from him. The *Chafetz Chaim* declared – “It appears from *Shamayim* (Heaven) that I am being blocked,” and he then stopped all of his efforts in this matter.

Let us each think, if these two occurrences were presented to us, how would we decide? How would we interpret what the *hashgacha* wanted from us?... We could easily have reached the exact opposite conclusion from the *Chafetz Chaim* – interpreting what he recognized as the *ma'aseh Satan* as the *siman min HaShamayim*, and the *siman min haShamayim* as the *ma'aseh Satan*.

Biases and desires fill up our minds, and are therefore active partners with all of our thoughts and decisions. Therefore, whatever our biases and desires are agreeable to, we view as *simanim min haShamayim*, and whatever they are opposed to we interpret as *ma'aseh Satan*.

How, in fact, did the *Chafetz Chayim* know which *siman* he should pay attention to and which to ignore?

Rav Zeidel Epstein suggested – Whatever was clear to the *Chafetz Chaim* from his logic [i.e. finishing the *Mishnah Brura*], he wouldn't change because of *simanim*. In terms of making *aliyah* to *eretz Yisrael*, however, where he was doubtful because of the various factors on both sides of the question, is where there was room for *simanim*.

***Ma'aseh Ish* (pg.145-6) – Three *ma'asim* (stories) which show that recent *Gedolim* (Jewish leaders) felt we were very limited in being able to interpret *hashgacha*:**

1. A student of the *Chazon Ish* was electrocuted...and his life was miraculously saved... He went into the *Chazon Ish* to discuss this with him –

“G-d certainly wants something from me. What else does the *Rav* think that G-d wants me to accept upon myself?” The *Chazon Ish* answered him – “It is impossible to know, and you may end up being misled, therefore, don't change anything.” The *Chazon Ish* knew the questioner well, and it was clear to him that [this student] was fulfilling all of his regular responsibilities, both in terms of obligations and prohibitions, properly. The questioner, however, thought that G-d might be expecting...a higher level of behavior. It was in regard to this that the *Chazon Ish* responded to him – “Don't do anything” since G-d never intends that one should do anything that is not clear.

2. Rav Moshe David Lefkowitz told the following *ma'aseh* (story) –

When one of the *Gedolim* was sitting *shiva* for his infant son who had tragically died, Rav Yaakov Yisrael Kanievsky (the *Steipler Rav*) went to pay a *shiva* visit to him. The father said to him – “The *Gemara* (*Brachot* 5a) says that when *yissurim* come upon a person, he should [respond by] searching out his actions, since everything operates through the principle of *mida k'neged mida* (measure for measure). If so, what is incumbent upon me to do?” Rav Kanievsky told him that the *Chazon Ish* understood that *gemara* to have been relevant only in previous times, but today we aren't able to search out and find [the cause of our *yissurim*]. In fact, if a person begins to search with the principle of *mida k'neged mida*, he may end up even more mistaken and misled from the proper path.

3. Rav Lefkowitz added that he heard the following qualification to this from Rav Shach after a different tragic occurrence –

“Of course, where a person clearly sees or feels that some things [in his life] need to be repaired, it is obvious that it is incumbent upon him to fix them. And if, G-d forbid, he doesn't attempt to address them, then he will face very serious consequences. However, in general, when he is neither aware nor feels that there is any specific issue [that needs to be addressed], he shouldn't begin [the process of] searching out. One should rather strengthen himself and increase his efforts with his learning and the depth of his learning. Through the strength of Torah, his *neshamah* (soul) will grow, even besides the *s'char* (benefit) of *talmud Torah k'neged kulam* (that Torah learning is equal to everything). Additionally, one should increase his *kavanah* (focus) in both *tefillah* and *brachot*, since they are the foundations of *emunah* and *yirat Shamayim* (fear of Heaven).

In other words, while *yissurim* may help to focus us on some obvious area that we need to improve, we will be unable, even with the help of a *Rav* to interpret them definitively, to know specifically what G-d wants from us (beyond fulfillment of — and improvement in — our basic responsibilities).

The ***Gemara Pesachim (50a)*** quotes the verse:

“*V'haya Hashem l'melech al kol ha'aretz, bayom ha'hu yihi'ye Hashem echad u'shmo echad* – And it will be that G-d will be King over all the earth, on that day G-d will be one and His Name will be one” (*Zecharia 14:9*)

The *gemara* then asks the question –

[But] can it be that today He is not one? Rebbe Acha bar Chanina answers – *Olam Haba* (the world to come) is not like *Olam Ha'zeh* (this world):

In *Olam Ha'zeh*, upon hearing positive news we say (the blessing) “*hatov v'hameitiv* – the One that is good and does good,” and upon hearing negative news we say “*Boruch dayan ha'emes* – blessed is the True Judge”; while in *Olam Haba* we will say only “*hatov v'hameitiv*.”

The *Tzlach* explains this with a verse from *Yeshaya (12:1)* – “You will say on that day – ‘I thank you G-d for You were angry with me, and now Your wrath has subsided and You have comforted me.’” Nothing bad ever comes from G-d, everything is for the good. Even the difficulties that come upon a person are not bad, but rather good to give him merit, humble his *yetzer hara* (negative inclination), and purify his *neshama* to merit the world that is all good. However, the one in this world doesn't understand that the [difficulties] are benefiting him, since they appear in his eyes as bad. *Yissurim* that come to cleanse us of transgressions are similar to a painful medical procedure that is done for a sick person. If he is foolish he will scream to have the procedure stopped, while if he is wise, he will willingly endure it. However, after his death, or in the future time for the entire world (hopefully soon), when he sees and understands the true good, the verse from *Yeshaya* will then apply. He will then be able to give thanks for the past when G-d was temporarily angry with him, for the purpose of benefiting him in the end. This is the intention of the *gemara*:

“In ***Olam Ha'zeh*** one says *Boruch dayan ha'emes* on negative news” – since it seems that this is coming from *midat hadin* (the trait of strict justice),
“while in ***Olam Haba*** we will say only *hatov v'hameitiv*” – because we will then see **retroactively** that everything really came from *midat tovah* (the trait of pure goodness) and it will then be appropriate for a person to make the blessing of *hatov v'hameitiv* on everything that had happened to him **previously**.

In other words, in this world we don't understand that what appears “bad” is really benefiting us. In the future, however, we will be able to retroactively give thanks for the past. Therefore, we see that full clarity is possible only retroactively, in *Olam Haba* — not in this world.

Limited — but Not Exempt from Trying

Despite the many sources that speak about our limitations in being able to understand our *yissurim*, the **Ramban** (*Sha'ar Hagemul 124,125*) cautions us against giving up and not even attempting to interpret them:

One may ask – “Since there are aspects of justice that are hidden and [therefore] we [ultimately] need to believe that G-d is the true judge that does only justice, why do we need to bother, and why are we commanded, to learn the various explanations and secrets that have been hinted at? Why can't we simply rely entirely on the final conclusion [that everything is really for the best even if we can't see it now] and that G-d will never deviate or ignore any aspect of the judgment?”

This is the claim of fools that despise wisdom. We benefit enormously from this learning which gives us wisdom and an understanding of G-d and His ways. And whether we end up attaining

clarity or find that it is hidden from us, this [search for understanding] will help our *emunah* and *bitachon* in G-d — much more than those who never tried. We will come to appreciate the hidden aspects of the judgment from those [aspects] that we *can* understand, to recognize that they are *all* correct and just.

This attempt to know and understand the truth and justice of G-d's judgments, to the best of one's ability, which will settle one's mind on the matter, is the obligation of every person that wants to serve G-d with love and fear... And certainly with the secret factor that was discussed previously [of *gilgul neshamot* – reincarnation of souls] no questions or doubts at all will remain in the mind of a person.

Both the ***Chovot HaLevavot*** and **Rabbeinu Bachye** agree with the Ramban that it isn't sufficient to rely on the justice of *yissurim* through the acceptance of tradition alone. One must rather attempt to intellectually understand the principles behind G-d's judgments as much as one possibly can. The Ramchal, in *Da'at Tevunot*, points out that once one comes to understand these principles intellectually, there is then an additional obligation to achieve an emotional realization with them, as we say in the *Aleynu* prayer three times every day – “And you should know this day and place it on your heart, that G-d is the L-rd in the heavens above and the earth beneath, there is no other (*Devarim* 4:39).”

Therefore, we see that despite our limitations in this area, not only is it foolish not to attempt to understand *hashgacha*, but in fact, anyone who wants to serve G-d properly is obligated to try to do so.

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