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 matzdik hadin al kol m’orotav – to acknowledge G-d’s justice in all that befalls us. The Orchot Tzdikim (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 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, 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 – mlumada (habituation). Mlumada 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, mlumada 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 Roshimot, pg. 97-101) says similarly from the Sifri:

"The verse “acharei Hashem teileichu (You should follow after G-d)" refers to the amud ha'an'an (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 asei (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'an'an was revealed and obvious to all. In every generation, however, there are also amudei ha'an'an, different amudei ha'an'an that are [either] hidden or concealed.

Every single Jew, both collectively and individually, has an amud ha'an'an which appears to him and guides him. He simply needs to search for his amud ha'an'an. 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 l’zechut ul’illuy nishmat Ruchama Rivka, a”h, bat Asher Zevulun