

Illuminating Man's Inner World

THROUGH THE LENS OF THE PARSHA

Rabbi Yehoshua Blass, Mashgiach Ruchani – Yeshiva University



Parshas Mikeitz - The Jail Cell Conundrum

There are topics in Judaism that occupy a small and somewhat obscure corner of the world of Jewish thought, and do not garner significant attention by either scholars or laymen. Alternatively, there are other themes that one can spend nearly a lifetime thinking about, and that require great work, introspection, and honesty. The topic I would like to address this week falls squarely in the second category. The issue is far broader and more complex than what I can address here but if you wish please be in touch with me for further sources and articles on the topic.

Like most complicated areas of philosophy or machshava the starting point for the discussion seems somewhat innocuous. Yosef Hatzaddik after informing the מִיקְשָׁמָה רַשׁ that he will be released in three days from his jail cell asks him to remember Yosef to Pharaoh:

.....וְעָשִׂיתָ נָא עִמָּדִי חֶסֶד וְהִזְכַּרְתָּנִי אֶל־פַּרְעֹה וְהוֹצֵאתָנִי מִן־הַבַּיִת הַזֶּה:

...and do me the kindness of mentioning me to Pharaoh, so as to free me from this place. (Breishis 40:14)

Presumably, based on numerous statements of Chazal (אין סומכים על הנס among others) Yosef was well within the appropriate bounds of behavior in posing such a request. However, the last pasuk in VaYeshev and the first pasuk in Mikeitz indicates that the butler had in fact forgotten to advocate on behalf of Yosef, and that the inappropriateness of Yosef's question resulted in the extension of his jail sentence by another two years. This idea is expressed by Rashi and is found in a host of midrashic sources:

מִפְּנֵי שֶׁתָּלָהּ בּוֹ יוֹסֵף לְזַכְרוֹ, הִזְקַק לְהִיּוֹת אֲסוּר שְׁתֵּי שָׁנִים,
שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר אֲשֶׁרֵי הִגְבִּיר אֲשֶׁר שָׁם ה' מִבְּטָחוֹ וְלֹא פָּנָה אֶל רֵהָבִים
(תהילים מ') – וְלֹא בָטַח עַל מִצְרַיִם, הַקְרִיבִים רֵהָב:

Yosef's punishment lays the groundwork for a lengthy discussion among the giants of Jewish thought revolving around two basic questions. The first question is somewhat technical. What does the medrash/Rashi mean in saying that Yosef is the paradigm of perfect faith and that he did not turn to the רַהֲבִים - the arrogant ones? This incident, in theory, proved just the opposite. Namely, that Yosef in fact did not have perfect faith as indicated by the fact that he indeed turned to the butler (the arrogant one) for his salvation. Secondly, and far more fundamental, is the basic tension pitting action versus inaction that highlights the opposing forces of pure faith versus the world of observable reality, nature and natural causes and effects. In classic terms Yosef's initiative is the ultimate demonstration of the clash between השתדלות and בטחון. Without sounding grandiose, how the meforshim understand and answer this question establish fundamentally different perspectives about the nature of the universe and man's place in it.

The first approach to this conundrum is espoused by a large segment of the 19th and 20th century Jewish thinkers including the Alter of Kelm, the Alter of Novardhok, Rav Eliyahu Dessler and perhaps most famously the Beis HaLevi (in his comments at the beginning of Mikeitz). The Beis HaLevi believes that in an ideal world man would be animated by faith alone and he would recognize that if he is in possession of perfect faith then his physical needs will be fulfilled. For various reasons we are commanded in the 'mitzvah' of hishtadlus which means functioning as though the world operates based on the laws of nature and cause and effect. However once a person has ascended to a certain personal status of faith, he no longer needs to be bound by those same principles of hishtadlus. Yosef's 'crime', so to speak, was that he should have realized about himself that his life was now functioning הטבע מן למעלה and that placing his trust in mortal man was a violation of the principles of faith. The goal of the ish Elokim is to ultimately

ascend to a point where faith alone suffices.

According to many authorities this perspective is what informs the conclusion of a famous gemarah in Berachos 35b. The gemarah records a debate with great contemporary significance between Rebbe Yishmiel and Rebbe Shimon bar Yochai about whether a Torah only or a Torah im derech erez approach is more legitimate. Rebbe Yishmoel says that based on the pesukim of ואספת דגניך, the Torah is stressing the importance of making a living, functioning within the observed laws of nature and being engaged in derech erez. Rebbe Shimon argues that if man is so busy with constant involvement in making a living then תורה מה תהא עליה - what will be with the study of Torah. Rebbe Shimon argues that if Bnei Yisroel are living lives of faith and commitment to HKB'H then somehow their needs will be taken care of.

What is the conclusion of this most important of debates?

אמר אביי: הרבה עשו כרבי ישמעאל, ועלתה בידו. כרבי
שמעון בן יוחי, ולא עלתה בידו.

Abayei said that many have tried the derech erez driven approach of Rebbe Yishmoel and were successful while many others attempted the Torah only approach of Reb Shimon and were unsuccessful. The Beis HaLevi understands the conclusion of this gemarah as saying that while in an ideal world one should follow the faith only path of Rebbe Shimon, it is simply not feasible for the average person. However, if we are dealing with one who has ascended to that exalted spiritual plane, as Yosef had, then no further efforts in השתדלות are necessary and in fact those efforts are an affront of sorts.

The Chazon Ish seemingly has a completely different approach to this issue. He apparently believes that man must always strike the balance between bitachon and hishtadlus. Whereas for the Beis HaLevi mortal man can eventually leave the contours and limitations of the natural world and can just reside in the world of pure faith, the Chazon Ish believes that the concept of hishtadlus is part of the ideal vision of how one approaches the world. Man's physical efforts need to be shaped and refined by a faith perspective, but at no point do we argue that the

concept of hishtadlus is inappropriate per se.

What would seem to be behind the opinions of the Beis HaLevi and the Chazon Ish is a fascinating position of the Ramban and others. The Ramban (end of Parshas Bo) argues that everything that exists in the universe is G-d's will. There is no such thing as absolute laws of science and nature independent of the ratzon Hashem. (Much of the philosophical discussion of pantheism and pan-entheism revolves around the concepts discussed in this Ramban). If that is true, then eventually man can acquire such faith and such clarity about G-d's involvement in the universe that he no longer needs to live by the perceived laws that dictate the lives of most men. While this idea might sound foreign to our more modern sensibilities, it is commonly found in many sefarim and informs the behavior and decisions of a decent sized segment of the Orthodox community.

On the flip side, for the Rambam and others who have a different perspective about the laws of nature and science, and who believe that G-d established distinct and binding laws of nature, than one would still be theoretically bound to those natural laws no matter the level of faith that one has acquired. As critical as faith is, man still lives firmly within the contours of the natural world. This debate between the Chazon Ish and the Beis HaLevi would seem to be related to this broader issue.

If the Chazon Ish believes that hishtadlus is an appropriate response even for those of intense faith, what then was the problem with Yosef's behavior? His theory, one that has enormous practical ramifications, is that hishtadlus is often an obligation but that it can't be born out of desperation. The problem for Yosef was that he turned to the רהבים -to the arrogant ones. He solicited help from the butler, someone who most likely would get out of jail and not give Yosef another thought. Asking for help was not the problem, it was asking the שר המשקים that seemed to indicate a desperation. The feelings of desperation should have suggested to someone of such faith as Yosef to pull back and be reliant on HKB'H instead of 'running after' the butler. The Nodah B'Yehudah points out that the fact that Yosef was asking the butler three days before his release as opposed to on the day of his release just further indicates that Yosef

felt desperate as opposed to calm and faithful.

Hishtadlus is often mandated but needs to be appropriate to the situation and the necessary course of action must be reflected on with a spirit of calm. According to the Chazon Ish, every situation requires its own cheshbon - its own calculation to figure out what amount of effort is required. When is one not being mishtadel enough and is too reliant on faith, and when has one crossed the line and has become either desperate or overly self-reliant? Finding that middle ground is incredibly difficult.

As a case in point, I remember several years back close friends were interested in getting one of their children into a certain school. They met with the principal and called a person or two to advocate on their behalf. That seemed somewhat reasonable and 'mandated' by the demands of the situation. A few weeks later they still had not heard an affirmative from the principal and by now had written multiple e-mails to the school and had asked six or seven people to advocate on their behalf. Somehow without realizing it they had crossed the line from reasonable and healthy, and thus mandated, hishtadlus, to something born out of frustration and desperation and hence a violation of the concept of appropriate bitachon.

While a full discussion of the challenges raised by this Chazon Ish is well beyond these couple of pages. Let me just briefly mention three areas that I believe should be a point of focus in thinking about the application of this dynamic between bitachon and hishtadlus:

1) How does a person ascertain the appropriate middle line? How does one know if spending every free moment trying to get into medical school or getting a job in finance is what is indicated and necessary or whether that smacks of desperation? What is the right amount, and what is either too little or too much? Obviously, it is critical to have experts in the field who are both healthy and balanced people and who are also יראי שמים who can be turned to help navigate these fundamentally complex issues.

2) How does a person know that their decision about faith versus efforts are informed by healthy considerations? We all have our own negi'os (strong

biases and inclinations) that push us in one direction or the other. When almost all doctors recommended certain communal precautions regarding Covid, what are the unseen forces and negi'os, that push a G-d fearing community to ignore reasonable measures of hishtadlus? What unchecked forces of anxiety and the need to feel in control push people to overshoot reasonable standards of hishtadlus and enslave themselves to certain unhealthy aspirations. These negi'os are often incredibly subtle and are nearly impossible to identify within ourselves.

3) Are we able to have what the Chazon Ish describes in a different context as a שעת השקט - a sense of peace and equilibrium that allows us to sit humbly, quietly, and faithfully within our own lives? Are we able to faithfully say that 'I've done my best; I've put in effort and now I will stand back and cede control to HKB'H and to the bigger forces of the universe'? Do we have an overarching sense of acceptance and inner peace? Do we have the capability to allow faith to be a living breathing force within our own souls and consciousness?

Hence, the avodah is threefold. To figure out the necessary hishtadlus, to understand our own biases that make the appropriate adjudication of the hishtadlus-bitachon dynamic difficult, and lastly to cultivate deep faith that allows us to be at peace in the decisions that we bring to bear in our lives.

Blessed are we that have Yosef Hatzadik and the other Avos and Imahos as eternal models of faith. Grateful we are to be able to openly and honestly grapple with questions of faith and to have continuous opportunities to bring faith into our lives in a very real and meaningful way.

Everyone should have a meaningful and restful Shabbos

R' Blass can be reached at blass@yu.edu