

עקב

YIRAS HASHEM

When a child is first conceived, he is brought before Hashem by an angel, named “Lilah,” who asks Hashem:

טפה זו מה תהא עלייה גבר או חלש, חכם או טיפש, עשיר או עי

What shall become of this drop? Will it be strong or weak, wise or foolish, rich or poor? (*Nidah* 16:).

All the circumstances of a man’s existence are predetermined by Hashem. A man’s health, intellect, and financial status are all part of a greater plan, and far beyond man’s control.

ארבעים יום קודם יצירת הילד בת קול יוצאת ואומרת בת פלוני לפלוני

Forty days before a child is formed, a heavenly voice declares “the daughter of so-and-so will marry so-and-so” (*Sotah* 2•).

Except for special circumstances, everyone’s mate in marriage is predetermined. Hashem constructs world history in accordance with His master plan, certainly not within the realm of human control. Rabbi Elazar ben Pedas lived in dire poverty and sought Divine intervention to improve his financial state. Hashem responded: “Would it be your desire that I recreate the world?” (*Ta’anis* 25•). According to Hashem’s master plan, Rabbi Elazar ben Pedas was predestined to be poor, and there was nothing he could do to change that.

All of life’s circumstances are pre-determined, except for man’s free-will in the performance of *mitzvos*.

ויאלו רשות או צדיק לא קامر

But the [path of] evil or righteousness is not pre-ordained (*Nidah* 16:).

הכל בידי שמיים חוץ מיראת שמיים

All is in the Hands of Heaven, except fear of Heaven (*ibid.*).

The fear of Heaven is an attribute of the soul’s power of desire. It is not controlled by Hashem but rather is entirely subject to man’s free will. This being so, what is meant by “All is in the hands of Heaven?” By using the word “*hakol*” — “all” — the Sages intended only those natural phenomena that are not influenced by the will of man, such as a person’s height, the weather, and any and all parameters that are not governed by human behavior (Rambam, *Shemoneh Perakim* 8).

Hashem places *neshamos* clothed in mortal bodies into this world to be tested. The circumstances surrounding the existence of each *neshamah*, from cradle to grave, including ancestry, genetics, health, wealth, profession, marriage, offspring, and longevity, are all pre-ordained by Hashem, all

specifically designed test conditions especially adapted to each individual. This world is one big laboratory and each situation is a test — success or failure is graded and recorded by Hashem.

כִּי כָל עֲנֵנִי הָעוֹלָם בֶּן לְטוֹב בַּין לְמוֹעֵב, הַנֶּה חַם נְסִינוֹת לְאָדָם

For all the affairs of the world, whether for the good or for the bad, are trials to a man (*Mesillas Yesharim* 1).

כִּחְכָמָה כָּל לְבָבָוֹת דָּרוֹשׁ הָיָה וְכִל יָצַר מְחַשְּׁבוֹת [הָוֹא] מִבֵּין

For Hashem searches all hearts and understands the inclination of all thoughts (*Divrei Hayamim* I 28:9).

The Torah teaches:

וְהַלְקִים נִסָּה אֶת אַבְרָהָם

And Hashem tested Avraham (*Bereishis* 22:1).

The word “*nisah*” means both “test” and “elevate.” For, through constant testing and successful achievement, man becomes elevated. The *neshamah* is put into this world to be tested, so that its ultimate reward in the world to come can be determined. The *neshamah*’s position in the next world can only be achieved through successful spiritual accomplishment in this world. Hence all tests in this laboratory are strictly calibrated, and specifically designed against the potential invested in each *neshamah*.

Bechirah, the ability to choose right from wrong, is the “*raison d’être*” of this world. *Neshamos* are not put onto this earth simply to enjoy the abundant materialistic pleasures available here. These pleasures are merely diversions, designed by Hashem to lull the unsuspecting *neshamah* away from its true goal. The goal of the *neshamah* in its materialistic form, man, is to gain as many credits as possible towards its eternal reward. The mere one hundred twenty years man spends on this earth is but a drop in the bucket in the time-line of eternity. Hence, the Rambam (*Hilchos Teshuvah* 3:4) reminds us that the blowing of the *shofar* on *Rosh Hashanah* serves to arouse us from the hypnotic trance the *yeitzer hara* casts over us — and also to encourage us to eliminate the “trivial pursuit of transitory values” and to get busy and occupy ourselves with *yiras Shamayim* — fear of heaven — the true purpose of our existence. The Rambam exhorts us not to fall into the trap, not to get lost in mundane materialism, but to always maintain the concept of fear of Hashem clearly in front of us.

It is then for good reason that the *Gemara* (*Berachos* 33:) is puzzled by Moshe *Rabbeinu*’s statement:

וְעַתָּה יִשְׂרָאֵל מָה הִיא לְקִידָּע שָׁאֵל מַעַמֵּךְ, כִּי אִם לִירְאָה אֶת הָיָה אַלְקִידָּע

And now Yisrael, what does Hashem request of you, but to fear Hashem (*Devarim* 10:12).

The *Gemara* states that the only valuable commodity Hashem stores in His treasury is *yiras Shamayim*. Fear of Hashem is the primary purpose of our entire existence; how could Moshe have treated this topic so flippantly?

By so glibly stating that all that Hashem demands is “to fear Hashem,” Moshe *Rabbeinu* seems to undermine the dire importance of this premise. The *Gemara* responds that, indeed, it is an easily attainable goal for Moshe *Rabbeinu*; however, for *Klal Yisrael* it might be different.

If someone is requested to deliver a large utensil, and is able to do so, it seems to him as if he must only deliver a small utensil. If, however, he is requested to deliver a small utensil, but is unable to, it seems to him as if he must deliver a large utensil (*Berachos*, ibid.).

In order to properly understand this entire discussion it is imperative to define “fear of Hashem.” Yaakov proclaimed in prayer:

אלקי אברהם, ופחד יצחק

“The G-d of my father Avraham, and the fear of Yitzchak” (*Bereishis* 31:42).

Why did Yaakov use the term “*pachad*” — “fear” — in relation to Yitzchak but not in relation to Avraham? The Torah had already previously established that Avraham was G-d fearing (*Bereishis* 22:12)! This term could have also very aptly described Avraham. Why then did Yaakov apply it only to Yitzchak?

It is important to distinguish between *yirah* and *pachad*. “*Yirah*” connotes a distant, long-standing fear; while “*pachad*” indicates a near, acute, imminent fear (Rashi, *Devarim* 11:25). The *Chofetz Chaim* (Introduction to *Nidchei Yisrael*) points out that *yirah* and *pachad* represent two different approaches in the service of Hashem. Avraham exemplified the characteristic of *yirah*. Hashem is the Master of all, the inhabitant of heaven who contrives all life, conducts all affairs of heaven and earth, maintains *Olam Haba*, and presides over the great Judgment Day. This is, after all, what the Torah demands of us:

את ה' אלקי תירא

“You should fear Hashem your G-d” (*Devarim* 10:20).

As important as this is, it is, however, a remote, distant relationship to the Al-mighty. It was this flavor of *yirah* which Avraham mastered and then imparted to his son Yitzchak. Yitzchak, however, improved on this disposition and elevated Avraham’s *yirah* to an exalted state of *pachad*. Yitzchak understood that Hashem was close to him, nearer than anything else, and was constantly facing him. Hashem not only resided in the heavens, but filled up the world with His Glory.

The trait of *pachad* is portrayed by David *Hamelech* in his exclamation:

שוויתי ה' לנגדי תמיד

I have set Hashem before me always (*Tehillim* 16:8).

Although *pachad* is a commendable trait in the acquisition of holiness (*Shulchan Aruch*, *Orach Chaim* 1:1), it is not a *mitzvah aseh* — positive commandment — as is *yiras Hashem*. The reason for this is that *yirah* is easily attainable by everyone, while *pachad* is only accomplished by the select few. Once a man thoroughly understands that his fate is in the hands of Hashem, *yirah* is an automatic response (*Maharal*, *Nesivos Olam* 1). The state of *pachad* is not so easily acquired. Moshe, the great teacher of *Klal Yisrael*, was far beyond the level of *yirah*; he had mastered *pachad*. When he exhorted *Klal Yisrael* to become elevated in holiness, he only suggested the minimal level of *yirah*, not the exalted level of *pachad*. Hence, the *Gemara*’s assertion that Moshe was being flippant and glib in his presentation to *Klal Yisrael* “to fear

Hashem,” is not really a serious accusation. After all, he did not ask *Klal Yisrael* to make the ultimate climb to the level of *pachad*, only to undertake the nominal responsibility of *yirah*.

Moshe *Rabbeinu* might very well have been somewhat flippant about demanding *yiras Shamayim* from *Klal Yisrael*. Moshe had already integrated the higher level of *pachad* into his own character, but he entertained lesser expectations from *Klal Yisrael*. This was Moshe’s technique in demonstrating to *Klal Yisrael* that the demand for attainment of *yiras Shamayim* was not an impossible achievement, but was rather readily attainable with a little bit of work.

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