

Each soul is a spark of the Divine, Who is One, but this does not mean that we are undifferentiated. The soul is the Divine representative found within each and every one of us and is the root of *ratzon* (“will”).²⁰ Kabbalists explain, “People differ from each other in their actions because they differ in their *ratzon*, and this is because they differ in their souls.”²¹ Rabbi Tzadok HaCohen of Lublin writes,

God desired to create distinct and different characters so while each soul has within it all of the forces of life, God arranged that the combinations of strengths should differ from soul to soul. While each soul has all of the forces of life within it, in each soul there is one aspect that is primary. Other souls will also have that force, yet it will be secondary within them.²²

Our forefather Jacob blessed each son with a unique blessing geared toward maximizing his potential. Then he blessed them

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20. See *Introduction to Kabbalah (Yedid Nefesh)*, Rabbi Y. Bar Lev, Ph.D. (date unknown). Based on the Ramchal’s *138 Openings to Wisdom*.

21. *Ibid.*

22. See *Sichas Malachei HaShareis*, 21, s.v. *Sibas Hevdel*.

again, as a group. Rashi explains that with this closing *berachah* (“blessing”), Jacob included every son in the others’ blessing, but, as the Maharal of Prague states, Jacob’s final *berachah* did not make them equal in every area. Each one was potent in the area that he was blessed in; this last *berachah* simply gave all of them an aspect of one another’s *berachos* in order that they should be grounded and well-rounded.²³

Naturally, people have different leanings and inborn desires. We come into the world with a unique set of traits that, as the Sages tell us, are not inherently good or bad but can be channeled to be either constructive or destructive. Even the basest traits can be used for good.²⁴ The preeminent psychologist Carl Jung explains,

Creative powers can just as easily turn out to be destructive. It rests solely with the moral personality whether they apply themselves to good things or to bad; and if this is lacking, no teacher can supply it or take its place.²⁵

Similarly, the Torah recounts, “She went to inquire of God.”²⁶ The Sages explain that Rebecca visited the *Yeshivah* (“Academy”) of

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23. Maharal, *Gur Aryeh* to Genesis 49:28. Noted by Rabbi Yehonasan Gefen, *Insights on the Weekly Torah Portion and Festivals*. “Each according to his own blessing he blessed them” (Genesis 49:28). Why is there a change from the singular to the plural? To teach us that each of them was also linked to the blessings of the others (*Tanchumah Vayhi 16*).

24. The nature of each person’s intelligence reflects the path the soul took on its way into this world and its *tikkun* for this world. This accounts for the varied forms of intellect classified by Howard Gardner of Harvard University in his *Theory of Multiple Intelligence*. He identifies nine distinct types of intelligence: (1) linguistic; (2) logic-mathematical; (3) musical; (4) spatial; (5) bodily; (6) kinesthetic; (7) naturalist; (8) interpersonal; and (9) intrapersonal.

25. Carl Gustav Jung, “The Symbolic Life,” *Collected Works*, 18.

26. Genesis 25:2.

Shem and Ever. She was told she was carrying two sons, one who yearned for the spiritual and the other drawn toward darkness, but both with great potential. Rabbi Dessler writes,

There is no doubt that Esau was given powers for good corresponding to his powers for evil. Had he summoned up all his powers for good, he could have conquered the evil ... and approached the level of our Patriarch Isaac [the “good” twin].²⁷

The Talmud states that if someone is born under the sign of Mars—meaning that he has an inclination toward bloodshed—he can choose to be either a doctor, a *shochet* (“ritual slaughterer”), or a *mohel* (“one who performs circumcision”).²⁸ His propensity toward bloodshed will not be fulfilled as an accountant or chemist, and such a career choice would only frustrate him. Dr. Abraham Maslow, who established self-actualization as the pinnacle of human need, sums up the principle:

A musician must make music, an artist must paint, a poet must write if he is to be at peace with himself. What a man can be, he must be. This is the need we may call self-actualization ... it refers to man’s desire for fulfillment, namely to the tendency for him to become actually in what he is potentially: to become everything that he is capable of becoming.²⁹

Therefore, he should, and must, find a positive outlet for his inborn drives. Any and all tendencies must be directed toward the person’s growth, and if he fails to capitalize on their positive use, he will ultimately surrender to his unbridled desires and be governed by them.

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27. Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler, *Strive for Truth*, Vol. III, 128.

28. *Shabbos* 156a.

29. Maslow, *Motivation and Personality*, 46.

The Sages reveal for example, that both Esau and King David were of red complexion, signifying blood. The difference, they note, is that Esau killed to satisfy his own cravings for violence and bloodshed, while David would kill only with permission from the *Sanhedrin*.³⁰ He killed only when it was justified, and his battles were acts geared toward ultimate peace and Godly service.³¹

Unquestionably, Judaism does not suggest that every decision is a product of one's free will capacity, but it rejects the notion that all of our behaviors are effectively a preprogrammed function of nature or conditioning.³²

Even when we are at a genetic disadvantage, each of us can decide whether we will succumb to temptation or rise to our potential.³³

Notably, large-scale surveys of gene-environment interaction research suggest that approximately one-fourth of the variation between the mental health statuses of different individuals is heritable, which means that three-fourths is not.³⁴ Chemical imbalance or genetic predisposition will shorten the fuse, but it is

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30. The Great *Sanhedrin* was the supreme religious body in the Land of Israel during the time of the Holy Temple.

31. *Bereishis Rabbah* 63:8.

32. Proving the existence of free will is not this book's objective. We will simply quote from the Rambam who summarizes its obvious and necessary place in creation. "If man's actions were done under compulsion, the commandments and prohibitions of the Law would be nullified and they would all be absolutely in vain, since man would have no choice in what he does" (*Eight Chapters*, pp. 84-5).

33. While the choices we make throughout our lives have a strong impact on our emotional stability, severe mental illness may be the result of serious trauma or a genetic disposition that impacts so significantly on one's basic life-functioning that one's thoughts and behaviors fall outside the scope of *bechirah*. Just as some people are physically disabled, others are emotionally impaired through no fault of their own. They neither choose nor cause their sickness, and to label them lazy or selfish is not only reprehensible, but mistaken.

34. See K. S. Kendler and J. H. Baker, "Genetic Influences on Measures of the Environment: A Systematic Review," *Psychological Medicine* 37, no. 5 (2007): 615-626.

the internalized stress and strain of life—via our self-generated perspective—that create the spark.³⁵

PLANES OF HUMANITY

The lowest level of our soul, *nefesh*, is referred to as our animal soul, because of its animating properties. (This is not to be confused with an animal’s soul, which contains only an animating force and is neither physical nor spiritual.) Our *nefesh*—which is spiritual—also accounts for our basic thought processes and gives rise to a generic ego-identity (with previously examined ego-based defense mechanisms).³⁶

When a person operates on this level, he responds to life more than he lives it. He exists with animal-like emotions and status. Poke him, and he turns angry; feed him, and he is calmed; compliment him, and he is encouraged; disrespect him, and he becomes enraged. His personality is resigned to a visceral interface. When we allow ourselves to be swallowed up by our base selves, our lives are reduced to nothing more than a conditioned response to stimuli.

Human beings have higher dimensions to their soul, counterbalanced by corresponding levels of the ego or *yetzer hara*.

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35. Genetic histories identify risk factors, but having a genetic risk for a disorder or a disease does not mean that its appearance is inevitable. “A great deal of mental illness—and even stress that falls short of mental illness—can be the result of a person’s own misdeeds. He lives in such a reckless way that he led up to it gradually. Now, of course, it could happen sometimes that even people who are not under such strain can suddenly lose it. However, usually it does not happen that way. It usually happens as a result of mental strains—and mental strains happen as a result of buildups and buildups. Even if it’s hereditary, heredity means that he has a certain weakness that will cause him to break under strain. However, if such a person is able to avoid strain or at least minimize strains, he could live his whole life in a state of normalcy.” Rabbi Avigdor Miller, *On Emunah and Bitachon* (Judaica Press, 2012).

36. See Ramchal, *The Way of God*, 3:1:1, p. 183.

The dynamic interplay between these forces creates our unique, richer personality. Because God creates each person with a unique purpose in this world, our talents and strengths are perfectly made for our mission.

Our *yetzer hara*, too, is fashioned to oppose us.³⁷ Hence, what is a struggle for some may not be for others. The Ramchal speaks of the difficulty in penetrating these layers:

Though the evil inclination causes a man to commit all kinds of sins, there are some which a person's nature renders more desirable to him, and, consequently, provides him with more rationalizations for. He therefore requires in relation to them additional strengthening to vanquish his evil inclination and be clean of sin.³⁸

The struggles we face are sometimes universal and generic—in other words, overcoming anger and laziness—and other times unique to us, such as dealing with a specific physical limitation or emotional sensitivity, which is often a function of *tikkun* (“repair” or “rectification of the soul”), and encompassed within our genetics and/or upbringing.³⁹

BECOMING EXTRAORDINARY

King Solomon tells us throughout Ecclesiastes that all suffering comes from trying to give permanence to the temporary. The soul seeks permanence through giving—investing in a commodity that will be forever ours; it recognizes that we keep whoever we

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37. See *Kiddushin* 52b.

38. *Mesillas Yesharim (The Path of the Just)*, Ch. 1.

39. It becomes clear why envy is such a destructive trait and “causes the bones to rot” (Proverbs 14:30). We each receive exactly what we need in order to maximize our potential. To envy someone else is to neglect our own uniqueness and the very purpose for our existence.

become, and that is ultimately shaped by what we give, not by what we take.⁴⁰

Our soul is drawn to reunite with Immortality, but the aberration of this quest is the ego's search for permanence through taking.⁴¹ The ego lunges after longevity through money, power, and control, while the soul yearns for true independence—freedom over the self—which enables the apex in self-expression.⁴²

The ego relishes creative acts in order to make its mark on the world—an illogical pursuit of monuments and awards, anything that will stand the test of time.⁴³ It thirsts to be special, desperately longing to set itself apart, even if it tears us apart. It does not care whether the end-goal is accomplished through productive or destructive means. It only seeks to make a big splash. Hence the proclamation of the Sages: "The construction of fools is destruction."⁴⁴

Ironically, the ego chase leaves us a homogenized, blended

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40. "The more flesh, the more worms [will eventually consume him in the grave]; the more property, the more worry; the more wives, the more witchcraft; the more maidservants, the more lewdness; the more slaves, the more thievery. The more Torah, the more life; the more study, the more wisdom; the more advice, the more understanding; the more charity, the more peace. One who acquires a good name acquires it for himself; one who acquires words of Torah has acquired himself a share in the World to Come" (Ethics of the Fathers 2:7).

41. The psychological motivation is explained: "By continually taking and piling and computing interest and leaving to one's heirs, man contrives the illusion that he is in complete control of his destiny." Ernst Becker, *Escape from Evil* (New York: Free Press, 1985).

42. The Sages ask and answer: "Who is strong? One who controls his [natural] inclination" (Ethics of the Fathers 4:1).

43. We say illogical because even while he rejects a world beyond this one, he desires to be remembered. But why? If there is no existence for him beyond the physical world, why should he care that those who come after him are aware of his accomplishments? What good does this do him? None, according to his own logic, but his soul knows differently. "We do not erect monuments for the *Tzaddikim*; their words are their deeds and their true enduring memorial" (*Yerushalmi Shekalim*).

44. *Megillah* 31b.

existence that only blurs our uniqueness and further obscures God. When we seek to follow a destructive path in a futile attempt to be different, we end up as carbon copies of all other ego-oriented people and are confined to an automated existence and a generic personality. When our ego dominates, life is indeed programmed—but we are the unwitting programmers.

LETTING GOD SHINE THROUGH

The serpent sought to convince Eve to eat from the forbidden tree by arousing her most powerful instinct to become a creator: “Your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God knowing good and evil.”⁴⁵ Not surprising, the opposite is true: Only suppression of the ego (aka “serpent”) allows for our individuality to fully express itself. We are created in the image of God, a reflection of the manifestation of His will.⁴⁶ Our purpose is to reflect as much of God as we can, and the degree to which we nullify the “I,” the more we bring God into the world via the display of Divine attributes that emerges within us.⁴⁷

The Talmud teaches, “For the mind of each is different from that of the other, just as the face of each is different from that of the other.”⁴⁸ Based on the origin of one’s soul, every individual has a special blend of character traits essential for a distinct mission that we are both designed for and drawn to. In following the precepts of the Torah, we move toward perfecting ourselves, and we fulfill

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45. Genesis 3:4.

46. *Ibid.*, 1:26.

47. Rearranging the Hebrew word for “I,” *ani*, spells the word *ayin*, which denotes “nothingness.” Noted by Aryeh Kaplan, *Jewish Meditation: A Practical Guide* (New York: Schocken Books, 1985), 87.

48. *Berachos* 58a. This teaching is in response to the often-asked question on the *Midrash* that states that the waters of the Red Sea were split into 600,000 paths—one for each family: “What is the need for multiple paths when a single path would have been sufficient?” See *Midrash (Shocher Tov)* 114.

our purpose in bringing God's glory into the world, as only we can.⁴⁹ A brilliant spark of Divine light is then illuminated, radiating throughout creation.⁵⁰

LET US MAKE MAN

Creating oneself is not just an act of independence but the ultimate act of *chesed*. We take what exists and then, through our own efforts, put something new—a revised self—back into creation. We cannot give what we do not own. Only by creating ourselves are we able to become a genuine source of giving, instead of a mere conduit for goodness. Rabbi Dovid Hofstedter writes,

Chazal [our Sages] proclaimed of Eliezer, “He has mastered his master’s Torah” (*Yoma* 28b). *Chazal* teach that he also had complete control over his *yetzer hara* (see *Bereishis Rabbah* 59:8). No slouch. In fact he was one of the few individuals who did not die but entered *Gan Eden* while he was still alive. Why then did Avraham seek out a wife for Yitzchak from those steeped in wicked behavior including *avodah zarah* [idol worship]? Eliezer was a descendent of Cham, a people cursed by Noah to forever be slaves... . It became part of their genetic makeup, so deeply entrenched in their souls that it cannot be extracted even through the sacred fire of Torah study. We see the results of this in Eliezer, Avraham Avinu’s [Abraham, our forefather] faithful servant.⁵¹

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49. “If I am not for myself, who will be for me? But if I am only for myself, who am I? If not now, when?” (*Ethics of the Fathers* 1:14).

50. This is the primary lesson taught by the great Chafetz Chaim, who set out to change the world. Realizing that was impossible, he decided to change his community. Then realizing that, too, was a foregone dream, he aimed to change his family. Finally, he realized his real goal in life was to change himself. He accomplished just that and, in doing so, changed the world.

51. Rabbi Dovid Hofstedter, *Dorash Dovid* (Israel Bookshop, 2011), 101-102.

Eliezer did not have the spiritual roots to go beyond what he was. He could never be a creator in the truest human sense. Such a person can reflect uniqueness, even radiate it—but he cannot generate it. He cannot be original. Thus, he could not produce offspring who could contribute anything new. In order for the Jewish people to bring forth the Final Redemption to reveal the Oneness of God, we each need to emit our own spark of individuality. This he did not have, and so Abraham could not allow Eliezer’s daughter to marry his son.

When a person is busy building an image or succumbing to cravings and impulses, he never rises above reactionary living. He does not create anything—certainly not himself. When we are independent, we are partners in our own creation and in creation itself.

The wisest of men exhorts, “All of this is *hevel* [futility or vanity]... . That which has been is that which shall be; and that which has been done is that which shall be done: there is nothing new under the sun.”⁵² The *Zohar* states that futility here refers to our actions that are done “under the sun”; it adds, however, that *chesed*—acts of righteousness and lovingkindness—are done “above the sun.”⁵³

Only He Who is beyond the sun can create. When we tap into God’s will and learn our nature in His way, we exercise the height of free will and leave the finite nature of this world behind. We draw down the power to create ourselves and enjoy true permanence—who we become for all eternity.

The desire to create burns deep within each of us. We derive

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52. Ecclesiastes 1:2–9. *Hevel* literally means “breath” or “vapor” and is often translated into words such as “futile,” “meaningless,” and “fleeting,” to connote something that exists and then dissipates without a trace.

53. See *Zohar* II:59a.

intense and unparalleled satisfaction from creative thought and action. It rivets our attention and expresses our individuality. We notice how much pleasure a small child receives from drawing a picture. We are driven to be unique, to express ourselves. God is the ultimate Creator. This is why we find self-expression and creativity so pleasurable—because being like God is the greatest pleasure, and when we create ourselves, we fulfill our role in the greater tapestry of creation.



13 | A PERMANENT SHAPE

In Judaism, we speak of two worlds: *Olam Hazeah* (“this world”) and *Olam Haba* (“the World to Come”).⁵⁴ The Sages say that this world exists only as a corridor to the next and was created by God to give us the opportunity to earn our place, so that we can enjoy eternity without the heavy shame that would accompany a “spiritual handout.”⁵⁵ “The good that man ultimately receives is therefore as much the result of his own efforts as it is a gift of God.”⁵⁶

Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan writes, “A person experiences shame when he is caught doing something that he should not or when he finds himself in an improper place. But for a mere receiver to be close to God is also an improper place.”⁵⁷

In the next world, we cannot be where we do not belong. Not because we are chased away, but because we flee as one would from a burning building. The soul aches to be closer to

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54. At the end of this chapter we will refine our definitions and parse distinctions between the non-physical realms. As we will explain, *Olam Haba* is not necessarily the same as *Gan Eden* (“the Garden of Eden”).

55. Ethics of the Fathers 4:21. Ramchal, *The Way of God*, 39 (1:2:2).

56. Kaplan, *If You Were God*, 59.

57. *Ibid.*, 56.

the glory of God, but the blistering, intense pain of unrelenting shame—of being where it does not belong—does not permit the soul to remain there.⁵⁸

This is described as *nehama d'kesufa* (“the bread of shame”): “One who eats another’s bread is ashamed to look in his face.”⁵⁹ In this world, we do not feel the full weight of shame because the ego protects us with a sense of entitlement. But neither our ego nor our physical self exists in the next world.

Still, even in this world we are wired to derive more satisfaction from something we have worked for than from something that was merely handed to us. Our experience testifies to the wisdom of the Sages: “A person prefers one portion of what is his more than nine portions from someone else.”⁶⁰

WE CANNOT PRETEND

But why do we need to earn our place? Why doesn’t God use some Divine hypnosis to allow us to feel the pleasure of His proximity without the feeling of shame? Or better still, perhaps He could install within us a fabricated memory of earning our reward?

We learned earlier that in the nonphysical world, closeness is measured in terms of similarities that manifest in levels of awareness. It is thus impossible for spiritual opposites to be close to each other. Imagine the words *true* and *false*. In conceptual space, where might we put them in a room—next to each other or far apart? Now think of *love* and *happiness*. These two words would be placed closer together.

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58. “If a person does not prepare on *Erev Shabbos*, what will he eat on *Shabbos*?” (*Avodah Zarah* 3a). This parable teaches us that we will be sustained in the next world through our efforts in this world.

59. *Yerushalmi Orlah* 1:3, cited by Ramchal, *Da’as Tevunos*, p. 168. *The Knowing Heart*, Shraga Silverstein, trans. (Jerusalem / New York: Feldheim, 1982), 315.

60. *Bava Metzia* 38a.

Our Sages have said, “The seal of the Holy One Blessed be He is truth.”⁶¹ The essence of God is *emes* (“truth”), and His will is truth. Our ego can deceive us in this world, but our soul dwells in *Olam Haba*, the world of truth. In the next world, we cannot pretend to be something that we are not and convince ourselves otherwise. The concept of falsehood does not exist within the nature of oneness and ultimate reality. We either earn our reward or we do not; we are either similar to God or we are not—there is no make-believe.

In a similar vein, *halachah* (“Jewish law”) is bound up with spirituality here and in the next world. There is no division when it comes to the truth.⁶² Judaism does not separate service to God from monetary laws or relationships. God does not permit us to deny any aspect of truth that we find inconvenient or uncomfortable. The Ramchal writes,

The righteous hate a false thing. And it is in relation to this that we were warned (Exodus 23:7), “Keep far away from a false thing.” Note that we do not have, “Guard yourself from falsehood,” but “Withdraw from a false thing,” to awaken us

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61. *Shabbos* 55a.

62. Cf. *Derech Hashem* 1:3:2. The Talmud states that after our death, God will ask us a number of questions—the first one: “Did you conduct your business affairs with honesty and integrity?” (*Shabbos* 31a). Of the Torah’s 613 laws, more than 100 deal with business. (Meir Tamari, *With All Your Possessions: Jewish Ethics and Economic Life* [New York: The Free Press, 1987], 35.) True spirituality is not some vague feeling of transcendence, but the conscious application of Torah to every aspect of one’s life. *Halachah* delineates precisely how we are to conduct ourselves in the service of God. *Chazal* exhorts that one who wishes to be a pious person should be scrupulous in matters of civil and tort law (*Bava Kamma* 30a).

The Ramban writes that the commandment to be holy, “*Kedoshim tihiyu*,” means that it is not enough to follow the letter of the law but the spirit as well. He explains that a person can be completely observant, keeping all the *mitzvos*, and yet be called repulsive. Let us heed the advice of the poet Ralph Waldo Emerson: “Pay every debt as if God wrote the bill.”

to the greatness of the extent to which one must withdraw himself and flee from falsehood.⁶³

HEAVEN AND HELL

The conventional understanding of the afterlife is that two different places exist: heaven and hell. Heaven is for the good people, and hell for the bad. Judaism teaches that in reality there is really only one place, and that people have different experiences depending on where they are standing.

A wine connoisseur, for example, and an unsophisticated consumer will have different experiences even when sampling the same bottle of wine. The experience is determined by the refinement of the person's senses, the awareness of subtleties—texture, finish, body, and so on. The connoisseur's knowledge of wine changes his perception of it (reality), and so the taste of the flavor is richer and more refined (his interpretation). He will enjoy a different reality within the same reality. His perception hinges on his knowledge, which, in turn, alters the experience.

A linear representation comes to mind when we speak of the world "above" and the world "below," but these worlds are divided not by space, but by levels of awareness that either reveal or conceal the truth on a near-infinite continuum.

This world is a metaphor for the next, in which a person determines his own reality via the choices he has made. We are who we create ourselves to be, each behavior moving us closer to God or further away—for now and eternity.⁶⁴ The Rabbis say that we

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63. *Mesillas Yesharim (The Path of the Just)*, Ch. 11.

64. The *Midrash* states, "Woe to us from the Day of Judgment! Woe to us from the Day of Rebuke!" (*Bereishis Rabbah* 33:17). The vernacular rendered is, "*l'fi mah shehu*," "each one according to what he is."

are all alone in the next world, meaning that our reality is the sum of our choices—just as it is in this world, each of us experiencing a different reality within the same reality.

A FINAL FORM

The Gemara states, “There is no *Gehinnom* [hell] in the next world.”⁶⁵ Our Sages explain that while there is no eternal damnation or permanent designation called hell, we do have a transitory concept. Our transgressions are a barrier to the enjoyment of *Olam Haba*, so in His Infinite kindness God allows for a purification process.⁶⁶ The fire of *Gehinnom* is actually the burning shame we experience because of our sins (which include wasted potential).⁶⁷ Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan explains:

The Sages tell us that God will show us our potential, who we could have become; coming face-to-face with what we could have been, of realizing we will remain stunted and deformed having forever lost the chance to achieve the majestic and noble form we could have attained, is nothing less than shame. That is why this suffering is compared to fire, and the place of this terrible suffering is aptly called hell.⁶⁸

This process—the experience of intense temporary shame to scrub clean potential eternal shame—can only lift the stains from our *neshamah*; it cannot change a soul’s essence or remove what it

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65. *Nedarim* 8b.

66. “Fire below is one sixtieth of the fire of *Gehinnom*” (*Berachos* 57b).

67. See Kaplan, *If You Were God*, 31. We cannot move on to the next sentence without appreciating that this shame is through the lens of our unadorned soul. We glimpse the intensity of this pain by picturing the eyes of a loved one who is helplessly etched into place, unable to move, to even budge an inch—cycling between fear, self-pity, and profound sadness.

68. *Ibid.*

has become enmeshed with.⁶⁹ Death brings no fundamental change to our personality. Basic character traits and tendencies acquired during our lifetime remain the basis of our future experiences in the spiritual world.⁷⁰

This period of suffering lasts only as long as the purification process, because it *is* the purification process—which, according to most sources, does not exceed twelve months. The suffering ends here. Afterward, we “go to” “whoever we are.” Our reality—perception as a result of potential minus actualization—is our experience.

For example, on a scale from 1 to 10, let us say that a soul’s potential is a 7. In its lifetime, it actualized itself to a 4. In the next world, it will enjoy pleasure that is a “3” away from God. Another soul has a potential of a 5 and also actualized itself to a 4. In the next world, it will enjoy being just a “1” away from God.⁷¹

A person is not in a perpetual state of suffering because of his sins, and *mitzvos* are not canceled by his transgressions. After the cleansing process, the pain of the liabilities on the balance sheet is erased, and we are left to enjoy the net sum of our assets.

NO PLACE FOR EVIL

These above-stated calculations, however, do not apply to the purely evil soul. In *Olam Haba*, the concept of evil does not exist; therefore, the wicked cannot exist. To continue with the above metaphor, there are no negative numbers in the world of truth.

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69. See Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler, *Strive for Truth*, Vol. II, 26. The higher levels of the soul—*chayah* and *yechidah*—do not become blemished and remain forever pure. Some opinions say this applies to the second and third levels, *ruach* and *neshamah*, as well.

70. Ibid.

71. Even though a soul’s capabilities max out at “7,” this “7” represents a crude linear expression of potential in our world. In actuality, a “7” is this soul’s “10,” and we are thus rewarded based on our efforts, in contrast to our potential.

Pain is distance from God, but, more deeply, it is separation from existence. God is everything. He is existence, reality itself. (The difference between everything and nothing is exactly this: existence—everything *is* and nothing *isn't*.)⁷² Evil is incompatible with existence, and this is the worst suffering, the experience of nonexistence. In *Olam Haba*, we receive what we have created. What did the *rasha* shape himself into? Nothing. And this will be his experience: nothingness.⁷³

We can catch a glimpse of this feeling through emotional suffering. Physical isolation—or even being ignored—is painful. In fact, studies show that feeling alone or loneliness, more than any other factor, causes more stress and an overall weakening of the immune system. This is not just a matter of speech. Functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) scans reveal that brain activity in two areas where physical pain is processed—the dorsal anterior cingulate cortex and the anterior insula—become activated when a person has feelings of social rejection.⁷⁴ When we have no connection to anything real, we suffer, in this world and in the next.⁷⁵

Jewish tradition teaches that God does not withhold His good from anyone;⁷⁶ hence, the wicked are compensated in this world (see the following chapter), and then the negativity that engulfs

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72. This insight was framed by Rabbi Yitzchok Feldheim.

73. There is a dispute among the Sages regarding what happens to truly wicked souls at the end of the purification process. Some opinions hold that the wicked are utterly destroyed and cease to exist, while others believe in eternal suffering (Rambam, *Mishneh Torah, Hilchos Teshuvah*, 3:5–6). These views are perhaps marginally reconciled when we consider that the experience of nonexistence is the greatest form of suffering. With absolutely no connection to anyone or anything, the “I” exists in a state of nonexistence, because that which has no affiliation has no identity. The wicked endure an unfathomable type of solitary confinement—complete isolation even from themselves.

74. See Campbell, Rudich, and Sedikides, “Narcissism, Self-Esteem, and the Positivity of Self-Views,” 358–368.

75. The concept of *Kares* is expressed throughout the Torah and refers to a “Divine separation” or “cutting off.”

76. See *Bava Kamma* 38b, *Nazir* 23b, and *Pesachim* 118a.

them becomes their permanent state.⁷⁷ Their suffering does not end.

MOVING ON

The transition itself from this world to the next also hinges on our deeds. A person who identifies with his body will be less prepared—and will suffer greatly as his whole identity ceases to exist—while one who knows that he is truly a *neshamah* (“soul”) merely discards the garment of physicality and moves painlessly into a new reality.⁷⁸ Rabbi Nachman relates that for one who truly believes in God, the moment of death is a seamless shift from one life to another, akin to “removing a hair from a cup of milk.”⁷⁹ The wisdom of the Sages is captured by the heart of a poet in “Death Is a Dialogue Between” by Emily Dickinson:

*Death is a Dialogue between
The Spirit and the Dust.
“Dissolve” says Death—The Spirit “Sir
I have another Trust”—
Death doubts it—Argues from the Ground—
The Spirit turns away
Just laying off for evidence
An Overcoat of Clay.⁸⁰*

NOTES

77. The *Zohar* offers many additional insights regarding what constitutes evil, as well as the duration of punishment. Regarding our immediate discussion, it states that at the end of days, even utter evil will be saved from total annihilation, except for the nation of *Canaan*.

78. While the *neshamah* is, technically speaking, the third level of the soul, it represents the core of the soul and is thus used interchangeably with “soul.”

79. *Moed Katan* 28a.

80. Emily Elizabeth Dickinson (1830 – 1886) was a prolific American poet.

TRANSITIONAL STATES AND WORLDS

In this chapter, we painted the afterlife in broad strokes. We will now fill in some blanks, because deeper knowledge of life after death, as well as the transitional states of creation, helps bring greater perspective to our finite world.

After death, the soul enters a spiritual existence called *Olam HaNeshamos* (“World of Souls”) Except for the perfectly righteous, the first stop is *Gehinnom*, the above-noted cleansing process that can last from one moment to twelve months. The soul then takes its place in *Gan Eden* (“the Garden of Eden”) in one of two descriptive levels: upper or lower, where it continues to purify, learn and grow while experiencing great joy, based on its earned closeness to God—but still shy of the ultimate forthcoming bliss.

A soul that requires further rectification will not stay in *Olam HaNeshamos*, however, and will be reincarnated into another body one or more times. There is ambiguity as to where the already-perfected “soul-sparks” reside. According to some opinions, the *gilgul* (“reincarnated soul”) is not the entire soul, and those facets that are complete remain in *Olam HaNeshamos*. Others maintain that the entire soul is returned to the new body, but the perfected facets are in the “background,” and the sins of this person—the new entity—cannot tarnish these already-completed facets but most certainly blemish the dominant, unperfected soul. Either way, this soul-body combination becomes an entirely new person with a unique consciousness.

A fundamental tenet in Jewish belief is that the *Mashiach* (“Messiah”) will appear before the Hebrew year of 6000. The current Hebrew year is 5776 (currently, 2015/2016). The Messianic Era is a forty-year period that will bring world peace and the rebuilding of the *Beis HaMikdash* (“the Holy Temple”). There will be no change in the natural order, but universal knowledge of the God of Israel will permeate throughout creation, uniting all of humanity.

After this stage, humankind moves into a phase called *Techiyas*

HaMeisim (“the Resurrection of the Dead”) where the souls leave *Olam HaNeshamos* and reunite with their respective bodies (which God rebuilds akin to a seed sprouting into towering oak tree). The soul—in most instances—will be divided, depending on the *mitzvos* done in each body and the degree to which the soul was rectified. (For those who do not experience any spiritual growth or endure *tikkun*-generated challenges, there is no resurrection for that soul-body combination). In this phase of civilization, miracles will reign, and the natural order is increasingly altered, and ultimately suspended.

Throughout this time, the soul—which has become highly refined—purifies the body, which concludes with our final judgment to determine our eternal reward/place in *Olam Haba*. Authorities differ on “where *Olam Haba* ‘is.’ ” The majority hold that as humanity actualizes itself, our world will begin to morph into a spiritual dimension—*Olam Haba*, eternal paradise; while others state that after the Resurrection the body will again die, and the soul will return to Gan Eden, which is the true home of *Olam Haba*.⁸¹

In the words of the nineteenth-century author Robert Louis Stevenson, “Everybody, sooner or later, sits down to a banquet of consequences.” Our eternity is an inescapable reflection of the totality of our choices.⁸² Measure for measure, our deeds are repaid, and just as one can easily smooth wet cement, once dried, the impression is

NOTES

81. This subchapter draws from a range of sources. See Rabbi Saadia Gaon, *Emunot v’Deot*; Raavad, *Hilchos Teshuvah* of Rambam, 8:8; Ramban, *Shaar HaGmul*; Rambam, *Ma’amar Techiyas HaMeisim*; Arizal, *Sha’ar HaGilgulim*; and Ramchal, *Ma’amar HaChochma*.)

82. “After death, this itself is a person’s reward; all of his good cleaves together, uniting into one, and clothes him in the attire of Talmudic scholars” (*Ruach HaChayim* 2:1). “This garment consists of all of the deeds the person has performed day by day” (*Zohar, Vayechi*).

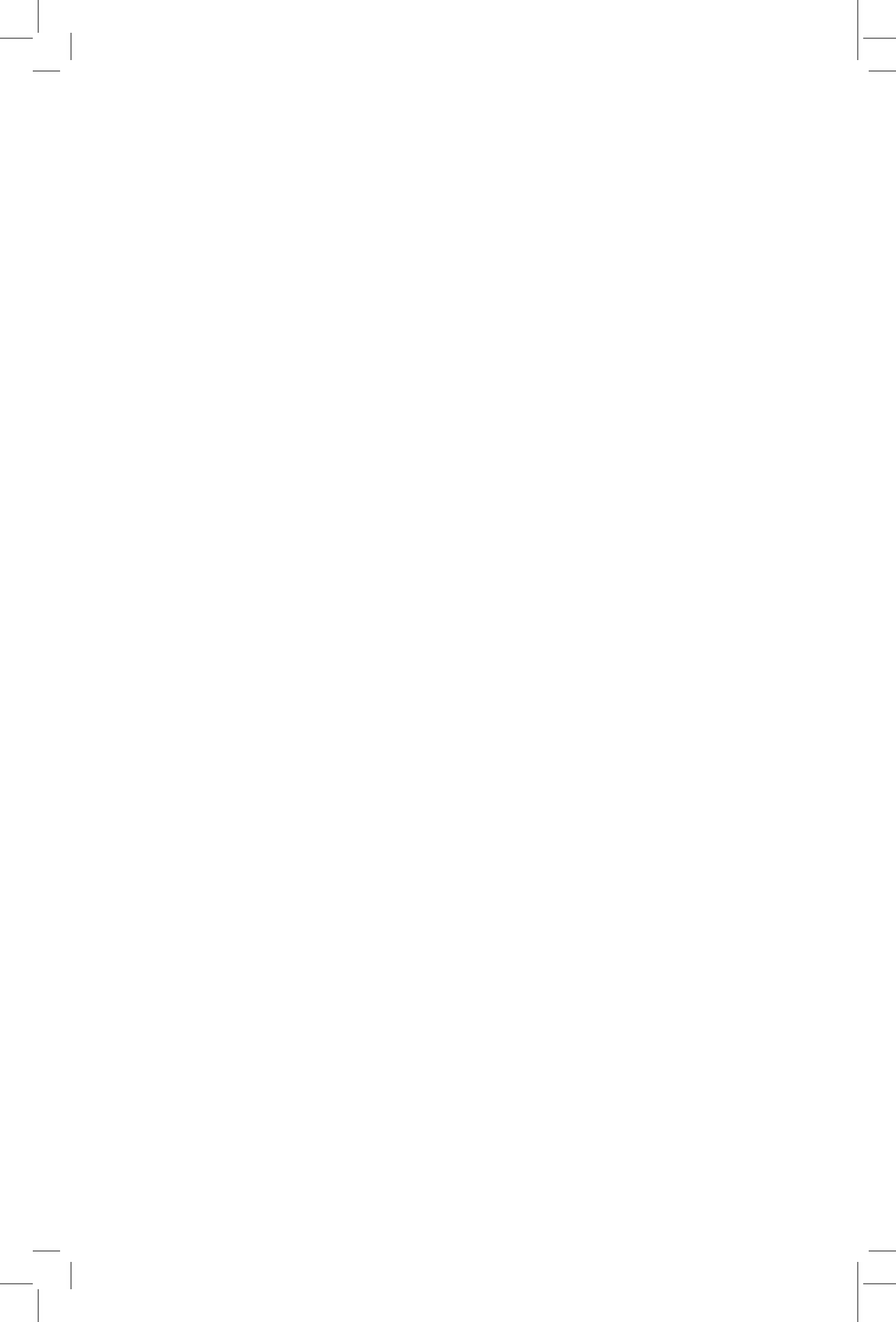
permanent.⁸³ Our behavior becomes an everlasting imprint in which we dwell for perpetuity.⁸⁴

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83. There are an infinite number of gradations within each whole number, and we will keep growing in *Olam Haba* in whatever fixed spectrum we have locked ourselves into: whether 10 percent or 95 percent. Humility hollows out a space for knowledge to exist within us, and from this point our knowledge grows—but cannot expand beyond the boundaries of our form. There are exceptions, as noted in the footnote below and in Chapter 25, “Unperceived Influences.”

While a staggering number of variables exist, the Taz (*Hilchos Tzedakah* 249:5) explains that doing a *mitzvah* in the merit of the deceased works because it “reminds” God that this person would have done this *mitzvah* had he been alive. Therefore, performing a *mitzvah* in memory of someone who never would have undertaken the *mitzvah* himself may be ineffectual in elevating the soul’s spiritual status; because the *mitzvah* is not imprinted into the soul, it has no relationship to it and thus cannot connect with and grow from it.

84. The *Midrash* states, “Man has three friends on whose company he relies. First, wealth, which goes with him only while good fortune lasts. Second, his relatives; they go only as far as the grave, and leave him there. The third friend, his good deeds go with him beyond the grave.” The ongoing influence of our deeds continues long after we leave this world. This is why the righteous are called alive even in death, whereas the wicked are called dead even in life (*Berachos* 18a). The souls of the righteous enjoy perpetual development and “go from strength to strength” (Psalms 84:7).



PART 5

THE SYSTEM
OF MAZAL

We have thus learned that the quality of our lives—and of our after-life—hinges not on circumstance, but on choice. Here we discover something equally revealing: How to rise above a Heavenly decree to effect change in our *mazal*—the controlling force behind the direction of the entirety of our lives.



We do not know the ways of God, and we cannot presume to understand every cause of every hardship—much less grasp why bad things happen to good people. In general, though, many of life’s challenges spring from one source, or a combination of nine sources, that we will assess. First, let us pose the often-paired question: Why do really good things sometimes happen to really bad people?

At times, God allows the wicked to prosper in order to reward them for whatever good deeds they have done. The Torah states, “God repays those who hate Him to their face, to cause them to perish; He will not delay the one who hates Him, He will repay him to his face.”¹ The Rambam explains that God compensates him for any good he has done, because he will be lost from the World to Come.² The good that he speaks of does not consist of *mitzvos* (or ordeals as a result of a *tikkun*) because such deeds refine the soul and would allow him to receive a reward in the next world.³ Rather,

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1. Deuteronomy 7:9–10.
2. See Rashi on v. 10.
3. Other commentators hold the Rambam’s view to mean that even good deeds which imprint onto the soul may be rewarded in this world. This happens when a soul is so completely encrusted by an iniquitous personality, that it is unable to appreciate any reward in the next world. A definitive understanding

he means the good that is done through fostering the illusion of an independent natural world (which is detailed in Chapter 20, “The Nature of Chance”).⁴

All of the good that we help bring into existence benefits us in the next world to the extent that the soul grows from the experience. Therefore, even an otherwise good person may receive a *portion* of his reward in this world.⁵

We already know that there is no comparing the reward of this world to the next, so how does a just God orchestrate such a deal? The answer is that any facet of the soul that is not purified does not resonate with God and thus cannot bond with Him.

A person is paid in this world not with the intention of short-changing him, but because he cannot enjoy full dividends in the next world. The currency there is as valuable to him as play money is here, in this world. The logic is clear: He does not benefit because he has little appreciation for Truth (with respect to this facet); he has little appreciation for Truth because he has little recognition of Truth; and he has little recognition of Truth because he is too dissimilar from Truth. And for the truly evil, they must be fully paid out in this world, because in *Olam Haba*, they will be incompatible with existence.

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is elusive because, as the previous chapter explains, there are multiple opinions regarding the definition of absolute evil as well as its ultimate destination.

4. God may allow this person to be successful in the natural world, while a more righteous person may be unsuccessful, because his payment is possible in the next world. Furthermore, reward for the righteous may be withheld until the next world, in spite of their efforts in the natural world (*Berachos* 5a.). And in fact, they may also experience additional challenges or *yissurim shel ahavah* (“tribulations of love”) in order to maximize their reward in the next world. Certainly, the emotional laws of free will are always in effect, which allows the righteous to take extraordinary pleasure in their meaningful lives.

5. See Deuteronomy 7:10; Psalms 92; *Berachos* 55b; and Shabbos 32a.

DIFFICULT TIMES

Our Sages offer the insights above and below to help us grapple with the unknowable, but we are reminded, “It is not within our ability [to fully understand] either the tranquility of the wicked or the suffering of the righteous.”⁶ Now on to our original inquiry: the nine main categories or life challenges. To be clear, we are not speaking exclusively of *nisyonos* (“Heaven-sent tests to foster spiritual growth”), but also of troubles that result from self-inflicted wounds.

1. Awake and Atone

When a person transgresses—either willingly or unknowingly—his soul becomes tarnished, and God gives us the opportunity to cleanse ourselves of these spiritual blemishes. The Ramchal writes,

Good deeds incorporate an intrinsic quality of perfection and excellence in man’s body and soul. Evil deeds, on the other hand, incorporate in him a quality of insensitivity and deficiency... . As long as [a person] still has this admixture, he is neither prepared nor suited to experience God. The Highest Mercy therefore decreed that some sort of purification exist. This is the general category of [affliction] ... to dispel the insensitivity in man, allowing him to become pure and clear ... prepared for the ultimate good at its appointed time.⁷

He explains that affliction may come to an individual in order to make him examine his deeds and motivate him

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6. Ethics of the Fathers 4:19.

7. Ramchal, *The Way of God*, 39 (1:2).

to repent, or as atonement for sin. He writes, “Punishment was only created to exist in the absence of repentance. What God truly desires is that man not sin in the first place, and if he does sin, that he should repent.”⁸ *Teshuvah* (“repentance”) removes the blemish, which refines the soul and creates change within us; as such, the growth potential is nearly limitless. If one does not repent he can still be purified through these punishments, but absent *teshuvah*, the suffering may be greater, quantitatively and qualitatively. Since a person can handle only so much, there is a limit to the damage that God can help us undo.⁹ Whatever impurities remain need to be addressed after death.

But, as we recall, there are constraints here as well. The purification process we explained in the previous chapter — en route to the next world — cannot change a soul’s essence. Referring to the World to Come, King Solomon writes, “If it is bent, it cannot be made straight, and if something is missing, it cannot be replaced.”¹⁰ The opportunity to make repairs is found in this world.¹¹

2. Natural Consequence

We cannot assume that a challenge is a *kaparah* (the aforementioned “atonement for sin”) when in actuality it may be an outgrowth of an irresponsible choice — which opened the door to a series of subsequent poor choices with unwelcome consequences. This category is different from outright

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8. Ibid.

9. If we do not get the message, the challenge may continue longer (quantitatively enhancing the punishment), and our lack of awareness means that we have no context for the pain, so it is felt more intensely (qualitatively speaking).

10. Ecclesiastes 1:15.

11. Ethics of the Fathers 4:22.

negligence (#4, below) because here, there is no direct and immediate correlation for having put ourselves into harm's way.

For instance, a person, out of arrogance, does something for which he feels guilty. As a result, he engages in self-destructive acts that over time injure his physical health. This is not an uncommon scenario. Failures at self-regulation are behind a wide range of poor health decisions, including obesity and addiction, to which an estimated 40 percent of deaths are attributable.¹²

Or let us consider a person who lacks *bitachon*. As a result, he suffers from anxiety and stress, which, as the Talmud states, weakens him physically.¹³ This is not a cleansing process; it is a cause and delayed effect that ripples predictably.¹⁴ Sometimes the association is more obscure. For example, Judaism advocates modesty, but when our ego gets the better of us, a desire to flaunt leads to dangerous consequences. The Gemara states that ninety-nine out of one hundred people die before their time due to *ayin hara* ("evil eye").¹⁵

3. Context and Consequence

While a person cannot expect that moving to a new place will automatically change his *mazal*, it may nonetheless

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12. See S. A. Schroeder, "We Can Do Better—Improving the Health of the American People," *New England Journal of Medicine* 357 (2007): 1221–1228. More people die from overeating than from hunger (*Shabbos* 33).

13. *Gittin* 70a. We cannot say that a person who suffers a physical ailment lacks *bitachon* or has a spiritual deficiency. A lack of *bitachon* or a spiritual deficiency may cause physical ailments, but there are other causes as well.

14. Medical research is equally unambiguous and confirms that up to 90 percent of all illness and disease is stress-related, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

15. *Bava Metzia* 107b.

affect his welfare. The Talmud states, “Once permission has been given to the Destroyer to destroy, he does not distinguish between the righteous and the wicked.”¹⁶ A person may find himself in the wrong place at the wrong time—facing a plague, tornado, earthquake, and the like—and when this force is unleashed, anything in its path is vulnerable.

In the Torah we learn that Lot is saved, but only because the angels insisted that he hurry before the destruction began. He did not have the merit to save himself from the midst of the upheaval.¹⁷ As well, our standing may not warrant God to supersede on our behalf during a calamity, so we must always take measures to protect ourselves. As such, the Torah commands us: “Take utmost care and guard yourself scrupulously.”¹⁸ A commentary on the Gemara expounds:

Rashbash, the son of the Tashbetz, was asked: “How does it help to run away from a plague? If it was inscribed on Rosh Hashanah that one was to die from this plague, then the plague will find him no matter where he flees. And if he was not inscribed on Rosh Hashanah to die from this plague, then he has no need to run away!” Rashbash answered: “It is universally acknowledged in Jewish tradition that a man has an allotted life span. But years may be added to this allotment and years may be taken away. When years are added this is described as being written in the Book of the Living, and when years are taken away this is described as being written in the Book of the Dead.

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16. *Bava Kamma* 60a.
17. Genesis 19:15–26.
18. Deuteronomy 4:9

However, his original life span may never have been altered. Within this category, death is still possible before his time if he endangers himself. On the other hand, if a person takes the proper precautions, he may live out his full life span. Thus, when there is a plague in the city it is incumbent upon a person to avoid it, lest he cause himself to die before his time.”¹⁹

4. Negligence

Unlike the person receiving atonement or one suffering the consequences of poor moral choices, this person willfully puts himself in harm’s way. A person is responsible for his own personal safety, and our Sages warn us that whatever natural protection or decree was in place may be withdrawn or overridden by willful negligence.²⁰ The Ramchal writes,

There is appropriate fear and there is foolish fear. On the other hand, there is confidence and there is recklessness. God has invested man with intelligence and judgment so that he may follow the right path and protect himself from the instruments of injury that have been created to punish evildoers. One who chooses not to be guided by wisdom and exposes himself to dangers is displaying not trust, but recklessness.²¹

5. Soul’s Root

This ordeal is not the result of a transgression but rather an inborn spiritual deficiency or capability. A character flaw

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19. *Responsa* 195. Excerpted from Artscroll *Talmud Bavli*, Schottenstein Edition, 2008. Notes based on the passage, “The Rabbis taught in a Baraisa: If there is a plague in the city take your feet in to your house to avoid becoming infected” (*Bava Kamma* 60b).

20. *Kesubos* 30a.

21. *Mesillas Yesharim* (*The Path of the Just*), Ch. 9.

must be corrected (and/or a hidden potential revealed) and only through a specific *nisayon* will necessary growth be achieved.²²

Often these experiences are a *tikkun*—a fixing or repairing of damage from a previous incarnation, or *gilgul*.²³ The opportunity for rectification and soul-perfection through *gilgulim* arises when we make responsible choices in situations similar to those we had in previous incarnations but erred. The Chafetz Chaim says that most of our questions about hardships would be answered to our satisfaction if we fully understood the issue of reincarnation.²⁴

6. Wake-Up Call

Here we face a particular challenge so that we can reassess our lives and change our trajectory to avoid unnecessary distress. In other words, our soul does not need what may ensue, and God gives us the opportunity to avoid this path—if we heed the warning. We need to be awakened spiritually, even if it means being shaken up, either physically or emotionally. We call this pain. God calls it love.²⁵

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22. See Rabbi Yeruchem Levovitz, *Da'as Torah*, ad loc.

23. *Gilgulim* refers to the revolving or recycling of souls through a succession of lives and is discussed at length in Kabbalistic works.

24. *Gilgulim* is the answer to another thoughtful question: What is the reason for the existence of severely mentally challenged or insane individuals? If the capacity for free will is gone, then what is the purpose of their lives? Such individuals might be here to teach others compassion, perspective, gratitude, or humility, but this cannot be the only reason. A person is never merely a *kli* (“vessel”) for another’s Divine service—unless he is already a perfected soul. His existence must also carry with it some benefit for himself. See Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler, *Strive for Truth*, Vol. 1, parts 1–2.

25. The challenges we face are in no way confined to personal experiences and most certainly extend to our loved ones. Even though a person may care little for his own well-being, these emotional soft spots remain a strong motivator for reflection and change.

We should note that at times these wake-up calls come as flashes of perspective—there is fear, but no lasting real-world impact. The purpose is to help us realize that God has saved us from a potential heartache, and, filled with immense gratitude, we then move our lives in a more responsible direction, synchronized with our life’s purpose.

7. Barriers and Barricades

Sometimes God sets up roadblocks, not to keep us from making a poor choice per se, but to prevent our putting ourselves into an unproductive or dangerous environment (as in category #3) from which we would not be saved. For instance, a broken foot may prevent a person from taking a trip that would put his life in jeopardy. To save us from a more devastating ordeal, God puts up signs and, when those are ignored, places guardrails and roadblocks should He deign to spare us.

8. Interdependency

The Sages teach us that when a *tzaddik* or an otherwise innocent person dies—God forbid a baby, for instance—it is a *kaparah* for *Klal Yisrael* (“the Jewish people”), and it has nothing to do with the person, the parents, the circumstances, or anyone’s choices.²⁶

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26. See *Kesubos* 8b. “There are also *tzaddikim* who die in their youth ... because they have completed their fulfillment of their 613 *mitzvos* and other particulars” (Rabbi Chayyim Vital, *Sefer HaGilgulim*, 4). In such instances, we could not have prevented this tragedy. There is zero reason to feel a moment of guilt or regret, and there is no cause for blame. It has nothing to do with anyone’s *aveiros* (“sins”) or deeds. This was a pure *neshamah* that was tasked with a special mission and, as our Sages explain, goes straight to *Gan Eden*. For this reason, Rabbi Moshe Feinstein *paskened* (“ruled”) that one shouldn’t say *Kaddish* for infants because they do not need additional merit. Nonetheless, it is prudent to examine our actions and to do *teshuvah* should we find negligence on our part. “If one sees suffering coming upon him, he should investigate his deeds,

Regardless of our spiritual standing, we are all connected and can thus be affected.²⁷ The extent to which others are dependent on us and how much our lives impact theirs play a dominant role in our heavenly judgment and status.²⁸ For this reason, there are some who advise that a person should be involved in helping as many people as possible, for if their *mazal* does not dictate that our help and support be withdrawn, then we have entwined another string in the rope to pull us out of any potential hazard.

9. Sign of the Times

We are living in *ikvoos d'Meshichah* (“footsteps of the Messiah”). This unique period in history has brought not only the disintegration of morality, but a previously unbeknownst breakdown of the individual—emotionally and physically. Medical breakthroughs and technological advancements are ill-suited to counter the rapid and rising rate of illnesses in our generation. Travails and tragedies force us to reflect, to think—to decide what we are living for.

The era that is upon us leaves us no place to escape to and forces us to choose how we want to cope, how we want to live. Very few will be able to straddle the fence of indifference. The rest of us will have to decide whether we are going to turn toward God or away from Him. Such hardships are a sign of the times and not a reflection of individual failings. Even so, we are not without options. Our

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as it says (*Eichah* 3:40), ‘Let us search our ways and investigate and return to God’” (*Berachos* 5a). Still, even in such instances we are only a *shaliach*, and our behavior did not cause the finale to what was most certainly an unalterable destiny.

27. This is not to be confused with a seemingly similar Christian concept. In Judaism, our personal sins are not automatically forgiven through the death or suffering of another.

28. See Rabbi Eliezer Papo, *Pele Yoetz*.

Sages tell us that one who engages in Torah study and acts of kindness will be spared the birth pangs of this period.²⁹ “*Chesed* stands by man to the end of all generations as it is said: ‘And the kindness of God endures forever and ever for those who fear Him.’”³⁰

After Moses petitions God to forgive the Jewish people for the sin of worshipping the Golden Calf, Moses asks of God, “Please show me Your glory.” God responds, “You shall see My back, but no man can see My face and live.”³¹ The Talmud explains that Moses was plagued by the timeless question of why some righteous people prosper, while others suffer, and why some wicked people prosper, and others suffer.³²

God was telling Moses that a finite mind cannot fathom an undifferentiated past, present, and future. Our limited perspective obscures the scope of His master plan and how it all coalesces into a single majestic image. While the full picture remains hidden, Rabbi Avigdor Miller reminds us that it is always signed with love by our Creator:

Whatever happens is being done by God for a kindly purpose. You may not know what that purpose is; it might take years to discover; it might be necessary to go to the next world before you discover what happened—but someday you will realize the truth in this principle.³³

NOTES

29. *Sanhedrin* 98b. In as much as these times are a necessary condition to the coming Redemption, our *tikkun* is most certainly a factor because it is coordinated with *tikkun olam*.

30. *Yalkut Shimoni*, Psalms 103:17. See Chapter 17, “Reconfiguring Mazal—Part 2” for further elaboration.

31. Exodus 33:18–20.

32. *Berachos* 7a.

33. Rabbi Avigdor Miller, *On Emunah and Bitachon* (Judaica Press, 2012). “God is good to all, His love rests on all His deeds” (Psalms 145:9).

The stated reasons for life's difficulties include those that are necessary for our growth and those that we bring upon ourselves. The former category is intuitively aligned with God's *chesed*. Acts of negligence, however, seem to disrupt the flow of His benevolence. How can we accept that all is for the good, when our very actions interrupt the good? We will shed light on this question in Chapter 21, "The Miracle of Nature."

The nine aforementioned categories in the previous chapter fall under the invisible umbrella of *mazal* and beg an obvious question. Yes, certain challenges inspire self-reflection and growth—but why is a particular flaw inherent in our *neshamah* in the first place? In other words, why would one person—or perhaps, one soul—through a succession of incarnations—be chosen by God to live a tranquil life, while another is decreed to live a more difficult life?

Questions of *gilgulim* aside, the Ramchal writes, “How [*mazal*] comes about that particular challenges are meted out to particular individuals depends on the spiritual roots of each person.”³⁴ He explains,

There may be a man who, in terms of his root purpose, is designated for a profusion of Divine providence [and resultant good fortune] which is one of the ways in which the universe is perfected ... as there may be another whose root purpose dictates for him the diminution of providence, the second means required for the perfection of creation. All of this relates not to the deeds of these men, but to the Blessed One’s

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34. Ramchal, *The Way of God* (*Derech Hashem* 2:8:1).

distribution of perfection of creation among the creations, each of them being perfected in its own way.³⁵

This knowledge is the greatest profundity, never having been perceived by any prophet or seer... . The generality of this ordinance, which is oriented not in respect to merit or guilt but in respect to what is required for the perfection of the universe in terms of essence, our Sages referred to as *mazal*. For its nature is decreed and it is not dependent upon man's free will [or] upon his merits.³⁶

Within the first man, Adam, God created 600,000 primordial souls that would include all of the souls that would ever exist in the world.³⁷ The point our soul originates from reflects the "place on Adam" where it originated. Each soul or spark continues to clothe itself into a human being until it corrects itself completely. When all of the souls complete their individual missions, we will once again merge (while maintaining a degree of individuality) into one collective soul, Adam.³⁸

From a finite prism, the issue of fairness cannot be resolved, and while one may protest as to why he originates from one point over another, the inquiry is suspended when the true nature of reality is revealed. The Ramchal continues,

The greatest good for Yisrael is the *sod* [secret thought] of removing jealousy and dimming the evil inclination. When each person recognizes his place within the hierarchy of ascension, although one will be higher and one lower, nevertheless, there

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35. Ramchal, *Da'as Tevunos*, 170.

36. *Ibid.*, 313–314.

37. See Ramchal, *ad loc.*

38. Precisely speaking, the soul of Adam is indivisible and cannot be divided. Only its expression has been fragmented and will in time be re-expressed in its original state.

is no jealousy or hatred, since this is the order according to designated levels [of spiritual development] ... each person has his own place and no one oversteps his bounds, just like the spiritual luminaries.³⁹

Even so, regardless of our roles and irrespective of whether they are earned or assigned, God rewards us in the next world for all of our efforts and struggles.⁴⁰ The Ramchal explains, “[Those] who were singled out by the Supreme ordinance for oppression and affliction are rewarded both for sufferings they underwent in this world and for all of their virtuous deeds.”⁴¹

TOOL KIT FOR LIFE

The word *mazal* is often translated as “luck,” because from our perspective what happens to a person often appears to be random. What we fail to recognize is that in order for a person to complete his task in this world, he may enjoy undeserved riches or be faced with difficult challenges. This is why a person may seem to do all the right things, yet still not seem to “catch a break,” while another person appears to effortlessly achieve success at every turn, often in spite of himself.

Mazal is more accurately defined as the confluence of attributes and circumstances that is required to complete humanity’s dual *raison d’être*—perfection of oneself and of the world. A person’s

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39. Ramchal, *Secrets of the Redemption*, trans. Rabbi Mordechai Nissim (Jerusalem / New York: Feldheim Publishers, 2011), 18.

40. Rashi (on Deuteronomy) with the statement, “Everything God does is just, there is no injustice.”

41. Ramchal, *Da’as Tevunos*, 315. Recall from Chapter 14 that the soul experiences closeness to God to the degree that it refines itself. Therefore, reward for ordeals that the soul is unable to grow from are paid out in this world, and suffering from self-inflicted wounds is altogether forfeited unless they fall outside of one’s *bechirah*.

mission determines his *mazal*, and his mission is based on his spiritual roots. Rabbi Dessler explains,

Before a person is created, the instruments which he will be given [to use in the service of God]—his *kelim*—are decided in Heaven in accordance with the task he will be called upon to perform in this world ... all his gifts, his physical and mental abilities as well as the material means at his disposal, are given to him to enable him to fulfill his portion.⁴²

At specified times for reasons known only to, and directed by, God, our lives jump the track of reward and punishment and are governed instead by *mazal*. Below, the Ramchal expounds on this and then describes the two concurrent and coordinated systems of Divine influence:

The Creator ... established two ordinances: reward and punishment and *mazal*. And He is the Decisor, resorting sometimes to one and sometimes to the other... . The Holy One, Blessed is He, combines these two ordinances so that even decrees of *mazal* materialize only through the agency of something which is attributable to reward and punishment.⁴³

- ❑ *Hanhagas hayichud* (“guiding power of unity”): The unfolding revelation of God’s glory (primary), where we have a set role to play in the master plan.
- ❑ *Hanhagas hamishpat* (“guiding power of justice”): The system of reward and punishment (secondary), where our choices dictate the consequences.⁴⁴

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42. Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler, *Strive for Truth*, Vol. IV, 40–46.

43. Ramchal, *Da’as Tevunos*, 317.

44. In actuality there are three types of *hanhagas hamishpat*: (a) *hanhagah* of lovingkindness; (b) *hanhagah* of judgment; and (c) *hanhagah* of mercy. However,

In Kabbalistic language: The two main principles are: (1) the residue, which includes the guiding power of justice, reward and punishment, good and evil [*hanhagas hamishpat*]; and (2) the ray, which is the guiding power of unity [*hanhagas hayichud*]. Both of these work as one, though the guiding power of justice is revealed, and the guiding power of unity remains hidden until the guiding power of justice achieves its true purpose.⁴⁵

Hanhagas hayichud is also referred to as *hanhagas hamazal* (“guiding power of *mazal*”) because, as we will discuss, *mazal* protects our *tikkun*, which is synchronized to *tikkun olam* (“repairing this world”). Our *mazal* helps us advance the path we must travel and is not a reflection of our behavior or our merits—but rather of what is necessary for the perfection of the inner nature of Creation.⁴⁶

An often difficult determination is how much of a given circumstance is our own doing via free will and how much of it is directed by God.⁴⁷ We can go through an experience that is a matter of our own doing, or it can be the result of a decree. Our physical health is a good example of this. A person can come down with an illness, if God wills it, but a person can also *make* himself sick through willful self-destructive behavior or with more subtle subconscious acts of self-sabotage. The percentage of our free will’s contribution to the unfolding of a situation cannot always be discerned. The Ramchal writes,

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“Kabbalists who received their wisdom from the prophet Elijah taught us that throughout the six thousand year period of the world’s existence, human beings have not been worthy of these three types of *hanhagah* due to their low spiritual state... . During this period the Creator has emanated an integrated *hanhagah* [which we refer to as the guiding power of justice].” Introduction to *Kabbalah (Yedid Nefesh)*, Rabbi Y. Bar Lev.

45. Ibid.

46. Ramchal, *Da’as Tevunos*, 317.

47. Ibid., 146.

[W]ith respect to anything that befalls a man, there is no one who can determine whether it is an aspect of reward and punishment, based on his deeds, or on an aspect of *mazal*, decreed upon him. And in everything there is an aspect of both.⁴⁸

FATE IS FLEXIBLE

In Chapter 22, “Mazal: The Fine Print” we will explore what makes one decree more malleable than another. For now, let us simply say that we cannot expect that fate will swerve to intercept us, and regardless of our efforts, fortune or crisis will simply materialize to reveal an unalterable destiny. We can trigger a fresh negative decree or thwart previously decreed blessings. Though God may have decreed good for a person, he often has to exert himself to obtain it.⁴⁹ Rabbi Kaplan explains,

A person’s days may be increased because of great merit, or decreased because of sin. It is thus written, “The fear of God prolongs one’s days, but the years of the wicked shall be shortened” (Proverbs 10:27). A person can die before his time because of his wickedness or folly, as we are warned, “Do not be overly wicked or foolish; why should you die before your time?” (Ecclesiastes 7:17).⁵⁰

A person can also unseal a *gezeira* (“Heavenly decree”) and annul or minimize certain hardships. After Abraham and his descendants were chosen for a higher spiritual level—a direct

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48. Ibid., 319.

49. “It is not the exertion itself that affects results; but still, the exertion is indispensable. Once a person has exerted himself, however, he has fulfilled his duty, and then there is room for Heaven’s blessing to rest upon him” (*Mesillas Yesharim*, Ch. 21).

50. Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan, *The Handbook of Jewish Thought*, Vol. 2 (New York: Moznaim, 1992), 299.

relationship with God — active Divine providence began to operate in the world.⁵¹

God took Abraham outside and He said to him, “Look up, please, at the heavens and count the stars, if you can count them ... so, too, will be your descendants.”⁵² God told Abraham to discount the effects of astrological influence.⁵³ “Even if there is a sign in the stars that you [Abraham] will not have children, you will rise above this and will merit having children.” With this knowledge, the Talmud states, “There is no [stationary] *mazal* for the Jewish people.”⁵⁴

Astral forces are influential but not irrevocable or inescapable. When we make a change, to the point that we recreate ourselves, our decree may be changed to reflect our newly revised selves. The portal between realms opens — and we exit the natural order — when we rise above our nature. Rabbi Dessler writes,

A person can change his place in a spiritual [sense], and consequently his physical environment and instruments provided to him may also change correspondingly... . A person may broaden his *mazal* and reach levels beyond those originally envisaged as his allotted portion.⁵⁵

Mazal — the instrument of fate and fortune — is not fixed, meaning that we can acquire a different set of tools and conditions, should we evolve ourselves sufficiently. What we receive specifically in the physical world depends on what we need to actualize our potential. With expanded potential comes recalculated *mazal*. Different choices = different mission = different *mazal*.

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51. See Rabbi Chaim Friedlander, *Faith and Divine Providence* (New York: Feldheim Publishers, 2008), 93.

52. Genesis 15:5.

53. Rashi, citing *Nedarim* 32a.

54. *Shabbos* 156a.

55. Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler, *Strive for Truth*, Vol. IV, 40–46.



RECONFIGURING MAZAL— PART 1: SPIRITUAL IMMUNE SYSTEM

Having observed that each person has a unique role in creation, we must ask what happens when one abdicates his responsibilities.⁵⁶ We do have free will, after all. The Sages explain that the spiritual slack is picked up by those whose desire is so great that it reconfigures their *mazal*. In the Purim narrative, the dramatic scene unfolds between Mordecai and Queen Esther, as he says to her:

For if you will remain silent at this time, relief and salvation will come to the Jews from another source, and you and the house of your father will be lost. And who knows if it is not for just such a time that you reached this royal position.⁵⁷

The dual message is clear: This is your job, but if you don't do it, God will assign it to someone else. Metaphorically speaking, imagine all of creation as a magnificent building, and a person chooses to forsake his unique contribution—a single brick. God

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56. In the upcoming chapters, we will explain in greater detail the particular ramifications of defaulting on one's spiritual mission within the framework of Divine providence and *mazal*.

57. Esther 4:14.

will arrange that his efforts will now help others to complete the structure—including his brick. Rabbi Dessler writes,

Individuals who are occupied with important matters on behalf of *Klal Yisrael* often receive an extraordinary—even miraculous—amount of Heavenly aid. Those that are truly humble are fully aware of their own unworthiness, and they are amazed at the success they are granted... . “How is it possible,” they think, “that we have the merit to accomplish great *mitzvos* such as these and with such an extraordinary amount of Heavenly aid?” The answer is that God in His great mercy bestows Heavenly aid on the person who steps forward to undertake a project needed by *Klal Yisrael* in spite of his personal unworthiness. God is prepared to make miracles happen for such a person.⁵⁸

The Sages say, “In a place where there are no people [who are worthy of leadership], strive to be [a leader].”⁵⁹ This is not an option, but an obligation.

After the sin of the Golden Calf, Moses, the humblest of men, was able to pray on behalf of the Jewish people and effect a tremendous change.⁶⁰ At that grave hour, he raised himself up to the supreme level at which he completely identified with the people of Israel.⁶¹ His prayers had the potential to influence the entire world, creation itself.

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58. Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler, *Strive for Truth*, Vol. 4, 207–208. A natural question arises regarding the person who works for the community, but whose motives are less than altruistic: Does that person receive Heavenly aid? The variables are too numerous to speak definitively in such instances, but we can say that the purer one’s motivation, the more Heavenly aid he receives.

59. Ethics of the Fathers 2:6.

60. “One who is wise, humble, and fearful of sin may be promoted to serve as a community leader” (*Tosafos on Mishnah, Sanhedrin* 7:1).

61. Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler, *Strive for Truth*, Vol. 2, 153–154.

Correspondingly, our Sages also teach that if someone prays for mercy on behalf of another, when he himself needs that very same thing, he is answered first.⁶² Such a person cannot expect to be able to deceive God. We are speaking of one who, with true humility, genuinely feels the pain of another. We then morph into a *kli* (“vessel”) that is now capable of accepting a great infusion of blessing and goodness.⁶³ The smaller our ego, the greater our expanded consciousness, and we effect greater change not just in ourselves but in our world.⁶⁴

The power of blessing is also equally enhanced. The Malbim explains that our soul joins with the Source of all blessing, and the stronger our connection to God, the more potent our blessings.⁶⁵ “The closer a person is to God through Torah and *mitzvos*, the closer God approaches the person... . In fact, one’s deeds affect not only the *hanhagah* [guiding power] toward the individual [who acts] but even toward the whole creation.”⁶⁶

YIELDING TO A HIGHER WILL

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch describes how our spiritual immune system becomes fortified, according us extra protection to advance our newly acquired mission.

People of integrity are aware of God’s proximity, for He grants

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62. *Bava Kamma* 92a. This apex of self-nullification defines *chesed*—to give with complete selflessness.

63. Expressed differently, we become a conduit through which this *berachah* is brought down and as the *berachah* “passes through” us, it affects us first.

64. “. . .when you reach the heights of *mochin d’galdus* [expanded consciousness], there you will attain the greatest humility and nullification of the ego” (Reb Nassan, *Likutei Halachos, Orach Chaim Hilchos Tefillas HaMinchah, halachah* 5).

65. The Malbim, on Genesis 27:3.

66. *Faith and Divine Providence*, 163. If an ego-less state amplifies change in the world, how does an egocentric person affect change? The answer is that

them both additional energy enabling them to carry out their good intentions and protection against their perils, which might keep them from striving to fulfill that duty.⁶⁷

The Talmud states, “Whoever tries to manipulate fate will eventually be pushed aside; but whoever yields to God’s Will, will overcome fate.”⁶⁸ God will move heaven and earth, destinies and decrees, for those who make His will, their will. “Nullify your will before His will, so that He will nullify the will of others before your will.”⁶⁹ This canon was poignantly expressed by James Allen:

*A man has to learn that he cannot command things,
but that he can command himself;
that he cannot coerce the wills of others,
but that he can mold and master his own will:
and things serve him who serves Truth*⁷⁰

When we transcend our base nature, we are granted not only additional energies and resources but we gain a real-world advantage over others.^{71a} (Recall the immediate relevant connections: to the degree we choose responsibly→ego shrinks→perspective widens→humility stirs→gratitude surges→we become more of a giver like God, i.e., become more Godlike [reveal God]→similar to God→see God=know God=love God→ultimately, leading to [active] Divine Providence.) Our conduct is the very mechanism

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the ego attaches to, and energizes, negative forces that are granted powers to influence both the spiritual and physical realms.

67. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, *From the Wisdom of Mishlei*, Karin Paritzky, trans. (New York: Feldheim, 1976), 22.

68. *Berachos* 64a.

69. Ethics of the Fathers 2:4.

70. James Allen (1864–1912), British author, philosopher and pioneer of the self-help movement.

71a. “Fortunate is he who is always in awe [of God]” (Proverbs 28:14).

that reveals reality or, more acutely, reveals or conceals the Divine Presence. Because the spiritual world is not subordinate to time and space, the more Godlike we become, the less physicality sticks to us, and the more Divine assistance we receive.^{71b} Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin writes,

There is a wondrous system by which a person can foil any evil designs of those who would harm him. If he follows these instructions, no harm will ever befall him. If he internalizes the concept that God is the One and only Power that exists in the Universe, and he devotes his entire being to Him, nothing else in the world can harm him in any way.⁷²

He explains that when a person focuses his mind on the fact that God is the Source of all, and there is no other force or power whatsoever, God will help him by causing all other illusionary powers to be removed and nullified, and this is precisely our task in this world—to live with this awareness.⁷³ In terms of absolute reality, only God exists. As the Torah declares, “There is nothing beside Him.”⁷⁴

Whatever the means of Providence we gain all the same, but as we will continue to note, the means by which Providence engages—how often and through what means—is in dispute. Most of the *Achronim* maintain that all of us are steered by God—via active Divine Providence. The *Rishonim* hold that this type of Providence is reserved for the righteous, while the rest of us (based on our closeness to God) tap into an “Active Intellect,” where we are guided by our intuition and enhanced wisdom, which allow us to see the metaphoric road more clearly, and, according to some,

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71b. See Maharal, *Tiferes Yisrael* 14, 25.

72. *Nefesh HaChaim* 3:12 trans. R. Avraham Yaakov Finkel (New York: Judaica Press, 2009).

73. Ibid.

74. Numbers 4:35.

activate preset laws that let outside forces affect, influence, and aid us.

WHERE THERE'S A WILL

A person must have an unquenchable thirst for growth, to be closer to God—to do the will of God—in order to propel himself forward. “He who comes to be purified—he will be helped; he who comes to be defiled—a way is opened for him.”⁷⁵ All of man’s behaviors are predicated on will.⁷⁶ On this, Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe writes,

A person that succeeds in entering a desire to come near to God ... so that this *ratzon* will fill him totally and unify on this [desire] ... [it] will pull after him all of the powers of the body and the soul, and all of them will be joined to this aspiration.⁷⁷

The Torah recounts, “Every man whose heart inspired him came.”⁷⁸ The Ramban comments that none of the Israelites had the necessary skill to build the Sanctuary and prepare the vestments. However, because they so intensely desired to do God’s will, they discovered a reservoir of talent within.

But more valuable than the power of human will, is the knowledge that we can change our will. And to do so, we must turn to God and ask Him not only for the *strength* to be better and greater—but for a greater *desire* to be better.⁷⁹ “The spiritual expression of

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75. *Yoma* 38b.

76. “Whether love or hate, man does not know; all preceded him” (Ecclesiastes 9:1). “Man cannot even comprehend at times what inspires him to love or hate something” (*Metzudas David*).

77. R. Wolbe, *Alei Shor*, Book 1, Ch. 25, 120.

78. Exodus 35:21.

79. “The one who sanctifies himself a little, Heaven will help to sanctify him much” (*Yoma* 39a).

da'as [knowledge] is *ratzon* and its physical expression is speech.”⁸⁰ As we explained, the gateway between the spiritual and physical worlds opens when we rise above our nature—but we must take this first step. “Open for Me an opening the size of the eye of a needle, and I will open for you one the size of a hall.”⁸¹

Will, or *ratzon*, is the source of all that materializes.⁸² Since we cannot originate a cause—create something that does not exist—within us, we must go outside of ourselves. We must tap into the Infinite. Prayer—a yearning ache that bursts forth from us to God—is the sole means to change our will.⁸³ An essential dilution of ego occurs through heartfelt prayer.⁸⁴ The Ramchal writes,

[P]art of the system set up by the Creator is that in order for people to receive ...from Heaven, they must first bring themselves near to the Source of that bounty and then request it. The amount and quality of that bounty they receive will depend on their efforts to attach themselves to its Source. If they do not make any such effort, they will not receive it. This is the essence of prayer.⁸⁵

The will to change precedes a change in will. When we are fully devoted, heart, mind, and soul, human beings are endowed with the ability to draw to them the spiritual power and protection

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80. *Mesillas Yesharim*, (*The Path of the Just*), Ch. 25.

81. *Shir HaShirim Rabbah* 5.

82. “‘Will’ which is [primordial] thought is the beginning of all things” (*Zohar* 1:200a).

83. “You open Your hand and satisfy the [deepest] desire of every living entity” (Psalms 145:16).

84. To maximize the prospect of having our prayers answered, it behooves us not to pray for selfish reasons, but to pray for what will allow us to better serve God and to come closer to Him.

85. Ramchal, *Way of God* (*Derech Hashem* 4:5:1).

they need in order to manifest their highest reality—even beyond their allotted portion. “In hidden ways God grants energy. He is a shield to those with integrity.”⁸⁶ “O Israel, trust in God—their help and their shield is He!”⁸⁷

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86. Proverbs 2:7.

87. Psalms 115:1–11.

RECONFIGURING MAZAL—PART 2: RISING ABOVE A HEAVENLY DECREE

At the time a person is suffering, the Heavenly court makes the angel of affliction swear not to leave that person until a specific date and hour and only through a designated messenger.⁸⁸ Yet a harsh decree may be reversed by *teshuvah* (“repentance”), *tefillah* (“prayer” and Psalms), and *tzedakah* (“charity,” “good deeds”), even during that time period, thus annulling the decree of affliction.⁸⁹ What do all of these actions have in common? They all promote humility—the frequency to God.⁹⁰

TESHUVAH

In Hebrew, *chet* (“shortcoming” or “sin”) connotes “distance.” *Teshuvah* means “to return,” and when done properly, we instantly regain that distance and move closer to God.⁹¹ In fact, our Sages tell

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88. *Avodah Zarah* 55a.

89. “Charity saves one from death” (Proverbs 10:2). Prayer can change a *gezar din* (“verdict” or “Heavenly decree”) (*Rosh Hashanah* 16b–18). On the *Yamim Noraim* (the ten days starting with Rosh Hashanah and ending with Yom Kippur and known as the Days of Awe or the Days of Repentance), we remind ourselves, “*Teshuvah*, *tefillah*, and *tzedakah* annul an evil decree.”

90. “God gives favor to the humble” (Proverbs 3:34). “In the wake of humility comes fear of the Lord, even riches, honor, and life” (*ibid.*, 22:4).

91. “Rabbi Levi said, ‘Great is *teshuvah*, for it enables a person to reach the

us that when a person does *teshuvah* out of love, his intentional sin becomes a *mitzvah*. We understand this because a sin is something that moves us away from God, whereas a *mitzvah* is something that moves us closer toward Him. When a person does *teshuvah* out of love for God, the very deed that had moved him away becomes a vehicle for moving him closer.⁹²

How is it possible to erase our past mistakes and even supernaturally transform them? The ability to do so defies the laws of human logic, yet is as real as gravity. Moving backward in time is unnatural. For that matter, emotional growth itself is unnatural.

Admitting that we did something wrong goes against our nature, but when we do so, God rises above nature for us, and He reverses the damage that has been done.⁹³

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throne of God,' as it says 'Return, O Israel, to the Lord your God'" (Hosea 14:2) (*Yoma* 86a).

92. The Four Stages of *teshuvah*:

1. Feel remorseful. Genuine regret for our wrong actions is the first step toward releasing our guilt. We must be genuinely ashamed of our actions, or we cannot truly be sorry for them.
2. Stop the behavior. If it was a one-time action, then there is nothing more to stop. However, if we are still engaging in the wrongful behavior, then we must stop it and resolve in our hearts never to commit the sin again. If we cannot change immediately, we should create a plan to gradually cease this behavior over a period of time and stick to it. We should also create deterrents for ourselves in order to avoid repeating the same transgression. In this way, we make a statement to ourselves and others that we have changed and that we are taking action to ensure that our improved selves thrive.
3. Confess before God. By confessing before God, we offer aloud the commitments and sentiments that reside in our heart. We should say, "I have sinned with this behavior, I deeply regret my actions, and I declare before God, Who knows my innermost thoughts, that I will never do this sin again."
4. Ask for forgiveness. If we wronged an individual, then we must first ask forgiveness from that person before asking forgiveness from God. We are not responsible for the other person's response, but we have to ask.

93. "By lovingkindness and truth shall sin be atoned" (Proverbs 15:6).

Teshuvah springs from the well of humility, and when we release our egos and take responsibility, we free ourselves from the confines of time. While it is true that change in the physical world takes time, change happens instantaneously in nonphysical space.⁹⁴ The ego blinds us to reason and binds us to physicality.⁹⁵ Acceptance of responsibility dislodges the ego, and the rational aspect or the intellect—which is not locked in time and space—is freed. Instantly, we move closer to God and our destiny is reformulated.⁹⁶

Rabbi Kaplan explains that *teshuvah* comes from the level of *Keser* and, “It is only when [the *Sefirah* of] *Keser* is hidden and [the *Sefirah* of] *Da’as* manifests that God is bound by the laws and logic of creation... . Whenever man activates his free will [rises above his nature] God’s *Da’as* disappears and *Keser* [which is beyond time and space] manifests in its place.”⁹⁷ *Teshuvah* is not beholden to time since it preceded the creation of the world, and thus time itself.⁹⁸ A famed first-century Kabbalist explains that God gave repentance “its proper place before the creation of the world and

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94. This can be compared to the concept of *hfitzas haderech*, “contracting of the path,” as happened to Jacob (*Chullin* 91b). While this level is theoretical to our generation, we see that to the degree to which we reduce our ego, we create a vessel that cancels the natural order and clears the way to more rapidly grow and expand our spiritual dimension. The idea of folding space is found in scientific literature. A wormhole, also known as *abbreviated space*, is a theoretical shortcut or tunnel produced by a tear in the fabric of the space-time continuum.

95. Times of crises or special times of the year (e.g., Rosh Hashanah, Pesach) can facilitate *bechirah klalis*—the ability to make swift and substantial changes in a person’s spiritual status” (Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler, *Strive for Truth*, Vol. 4, 93–95).

96. In Hebrew, the word *nisayon* means both “test” and “miracle.” It is a miracle, or a breach of the natural order, when we rise above our nature.

97. *Inner Space*, 54. The *Sefirah Keser* is an alternate manifestation of the *Sefirah Da’as*. See Chapter 18, “A Quantum State.”

98. “Great is *teshuvah*, that it preceded the creation of the world” (*Midrash Tehillim* 90:12). “One must know that before anything was created, when God stood alone, there was no such reality as time. Time, on its own, cannot exist” (Rabbi Yosef Irgas, *Shomer Emunim HaKadmon*, Debate II:17).

if a person repents, God will have mercy on him and his evil star will be turned into a lucky star."⁹⁹

TEFILLAH

Sincere and heartfelt prayer also has the power to annul a Heavenly decree.¹⁰⁰ When Jacob first met Leah and Rachel and their father, Laban, the Torah tells us that Leah's eyes were tender.¹⁰¹ The commentaries explain this to mean that she wept constantly in prayer that she not have to marry Esau.

People of the town would say, "The elder daughter [Leah] will marry the elder son [Esau] and the younger daughter [Rachel] will marry the younger son [Jacob]." Moreover, the *Midrash* states that Leah looked at her *goral* ("fate") and confirmed that Esau was her intended. When Leah heard the description of the wicked Esau, she beseeched God with tears and prayers to change her destined mate. "May it be Your will I not fall into a lot of a wicked one."¹⁰² Rabbi Huna said, "Prayer is strong; not only did it annul the decree, but Leah became the first to marry Jacob."¹⁰³ God heard Leah's prayers and orchestrated that she should become Jacob's wife.¹⁰⁴

The Gates of Tears are never closed to prayer.¹⁰⁵ The Gemara in

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99. See *Introduction to Chachmuni*, Rabbi Shabsai Donnolo.

100. The Sages tell us that in *Kaddish* when a person answers, *Amen Yehei Shemei Raba* ("Amen, may His great Name be blessed") with full concentration, even a decree of seventy years is torn up (*Shabbos* 119b). Similarly, it is written in the *Zohar* (*Parshas Noach*) that whoever answers to *Kaddish* in a loud voice, "the Holy One, Blessed is He, becomes filled with compassion, and He has mercy upon all."

101. Genesis 29:17.

102. Rashi ad loc., *Bava Basra* 123a.

103. *Midrash, Bereishis Rabbah* 70:16.

104. The *Midrash* ends that God responded, "She *davened* so much, it is only fitting that she not fall to Esau, but rather to the *tzaddik*, Jacob" (*Rosh Hashanah* 16a).

105. *Bava Metzia* 59a.

Rosh Hashanah concludes: “Crying out is effective, whether before the decree or after it;”¹⁰⁶ and “If a person sees that his prayers go unanswered, he should pray again.”¹⁰⁷

However, if an experience is absolutely necessary for our growth, it would be destructive to override the decree.¹⁰⁸ Indeed, the Steipler Gaon teaches us that if God desires that a certain event (or sequence of events) take place, then it is essentially impossible for us to change that reality, despite sincere and great efforts.¹⁰⁹ Should we find ourselves unable to effect change, this does not mean that our efforts or prayers are ever wasted.¹¹⁰ Rabbi Dessler writes,

Not on bread alone does man live, but on all utterances of God, meaning that not on the utterance to create bread alone, but on all other seemingly unrelated utterances, do we get our bread. Even if there is no correlation in our minds between our *avodah* in, for instance, the area of *shmiras halashon* [proper speech] and the area of *parnasah* [livelihood], God may “use” it for *parnasah*.¹¹¹

Furthermore, even if the decree cannot be annulled entirely, the consequences may be meted out in a more desirable way.

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106. *Chazal* tell us that everything is decided on Rosh Hashanah (*Beitza* 16a).

107. *Berachos* 32b.

108. For this reason, *Chazal* advise that if, after five years, we are not effective in making some headway, despite our best efforts, it is best to reevaluate our plans and consider a change in course (*Chullin* 24a).

109. *Birchas Peretz, Parshas Shemos*, 24.

110. On occasion, what we think is good turns out to be disastrous. Conversely, sometimes things happen that are difficult, but in hindsight we realize that it was all for the best. Life experience proves that we often don’t know what is good for us. In addition to praying for a specific thing or circumstance, it is prudent to ask God that whatever happens, let it be a good that we can readily see—to pray for clarity as King Solomon did when he asked God to “Grant Your servant a listening heart to govern Your people and to distinguish between right and wrong” (II Kings 3:9).

111. Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler, *Strive for Truth*, Vol. 1, 277.

Rashi writes, "If God decreed terrible torrential rains, they may come down hard as a staff and give powerful blows, but if they repent, God will bring these [torrential rains] on the mountains and hills, where no one lives."¹¹²

TZEDAKAH (AND TORAH LEARNING)

The Talmud relates that astrologers told the great Rabbi Akiva that his daughter would die on her wedding day. The cause: a bite from a poisonous snake. But on the evening of this auspicious day, her bitter fate was thwarted. She removed a brooch from her hair and stuck it into the wall and unknowingly penetrated the eye of a serpent that was poised to strike.

Rabbi Akiva asked his daughter if she had performed any particular act of kindness that warranted such a miracle. His daughter explained that at the wedding, when all of the guests were busily celebrating, a poor man appeared in search of food. She took her own portion and gave it to him. On hearing this, Rabbi Akiva told her that in the merit of her charitable act, her own life had been saved. Thereupon he went out and lectured, "Charity delivers one from death, and not [only] from an unnatural death, but from death itself."¹¹³

In parallel, the *Zohar* states that the Torah is the remedy for all transgressions. Anyone who studies Torah, even if retribution was already decided for him in Heaven because of his transgressions, the punishment that was decreed is torn up, provided he studies Torah *lishma* ("for the sake of Heaven").¹¹⁴

The Gemara explains that the power of Torah learning in combination with *chesed* is the most effective way to alter an unpleasant

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112. Rashi on *Ta'anis* (8b).

113. *Shabbos* 156b. The Talmud (*Bava Basra* 9b) teaches that when a person offers kind words, even without any financial aid, Heaven bestows eleven blessings upon him.

114. See *Shevet Mussar* 21:19.

destiny or to avoid suffering from any sin.¹¹⁵ The reason is as follows: The Rambam observes that the nature of God and His knowledge are not two separate things. God’s knowledge *is* Who He is, unlike human beings whose knowledge is separate from us. Therefore: (1) the more Torah we know, the more we come to know God and the closer we are to Him; and (2) all of the *mitzvos* relate to God’s essence, so the more we learn, the more we can apply in our lives and integrate into our actions—particularly acts of kindness.¹¹⁶ Both learning about God and emulating His ways move us closer to Him and further away from a harsh decree.

The logic is clear. Self-control allows us to rise above our nature and gain self-esteem; self-esteem automatically shrinks the ego (or “false self”) and allows for humility to blossom; and humility is the portal to a reconfigured *mazal* and an altered decree. Hence, the apex of self-control—being Godlike—translates into a revised destiny.

DIVINE INTERVENTION IN A FINITE WORLD

In loose language, God established three channels that run through the *Sefiros* and connect the physical and spiritual planes. *Chazal* explain that nothing in the physical universe exists that does not have a spiritual root above.¹¹⁷ All of our thoughts, words, and deeds activate mechanisms in the nonphysical world, based on the power and parameters assigned to each. This is the first channel, which is inferior to the second channel that follows.

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115. Due to a decree, there was once a family in Yerushalayim whose sons all died at age eighteen, with the exception of those involved in Torah and good deeds. See *Rosh Hashanah* 18a. See also Vilna Gaon on Proverbs 16:6.

116. See *Toras Shalom*, 190. In a frequently-cited Talmudic discussion, the Rabbis conclude that “learning is great, for it leads to action” (*Kiddushin* 40b). See also *Megillah* 27a and *Bava Kama* 17a. “Whoever engages only in Torah study (but neglects the *mitzvos*) it is as though he has no God” (*Avodah Zarah* 17b).

117. See *Teferet HaChinukhi*, *Parshas Vayeira*.

The Maharal explains that *mitzvos* are part of His Divine order and differentiate themselves from all other actions, be they good or bad.^{118a} With respect to this domain, there is a causal relationship—spiritual veins, so to speak, that interact directly with corresponding forces that are aligned with our *tikkun* and *tikkun olam*.

The third channel is the above-mentioned trio of *teshuvah*, *tefillah*, and *tzedakah*. Through this system, we effect change on a wholesale level—an override key, of sorts, that has the power to activate the frequency of *hanhagas hamazal* (also called *hanhagas hayichud*) to alter a decree.^{118b} In such instances, it is not the behavior itself that produces a correlating effect in the nonphysical realm, but rather, as a result of our efforts, it is we who have changed, and it is this transformation within ourselves that initiates a change in the heavens and in our fate.^{118c}

Here, God governs on the super-logical plane of *Keser*, and, as we noted earlier, He is not bound by the lower logic of creation.¹¹⁹ *Keser*, Rabbi Kaplan explains, is referred to as “the world of mercy” and when God chooses to, “He overlooks any sin that might otherwise prevent Him from guiding the world toward its destined

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118a. Maharal, *Chiddushei Aggados, Kiddushin* 31a.

118b. These pious acts can be performed with varying degrees of virtue—either out of love or tinged by self-interest. We can do *teshuvah* out of fear of punishment or out of our love for God. Our *tefillah* may be motivated by personal gain or pain or by empathy for another. *Tzedakah* may be given to stoke one’s honor or to alleviate another’s plight. The purer, more selfless our motivation, the more potent the potential of possibilities.

118c. God, Who is perfect, is unchanging. A new thought or volition does not arise in Him, and He certainly does not change His mind. So how do we explain the workings of the *third channel*? As we learned, God desires to bestow His good, and the greatest good that He can bestow is for us to be close to Him (by becoming more Godlike); hence, God’s perfect will is for us to perfect ourselves. Divine energy flows into every level of reality, in accordance with its capacity to receive it, and in response to our conduct, He reveals or conceals Himself. Yet it is incorrect to ascribe this interface—whether through passive

perfection.”¹²⁰ The notion of super-logic is impossible for us to understand, so we will use a metaphor to give us a taste of the paradoxical method in which God intercedes in the finite world, without violating the very rules of justice that He set into motion.

Imagine a person’s entire existence as a single dot. Without “touching” the dot, we can change it into something else. If we add a series of dots above it or below it, it becomes part of a line; should we extend the line at an angle, it becomes part of another shape; we can also reorient the dot to the top or to the bottom and make it a part, any part, of any shape. Put another way, the shape changes the context of the dot, and, as we explained elsewhere, it is context that gives meaning. With a new position or role, the rest of creation interacts with the dot, “us,” differently. In the larger scheme—in absolute reality—the dot’s entire world shifts, even as the preset rules of the “finite dot world” remain perfectly intact; and since creation is in a constant state of renewal and Infinity knows no bounds, this picture—“our lives”—can take on a new form, at any time God chooses.

As we observed, *teshuvah* comes from the level of *Keser* and is bequeathed with the power to change the larger picture because *teshuvah* operates outside of time and space.¹²¹ *Tefillah* and *chesed* also tap into this realm.¹²² We are reminded that prayer that originates from deepest recesses of *ratzon* can change a soul’s essence, reformulating its *mazal* and its place in creation. Regarding *chesed*,

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activation of a preset system or through active interaction—to (1) something unexpected or (2) a change of mind.

119. See *Inner Space*, 55.

120. *Ibid.*

121. “He who covers up his sins shall not prosper, but he who confesses and forsakes them will experience the mercy of God” (Proverbs 28:13).

122. *Teshuvah* that is borne out of our love for God (rather than out of fear—to avoid punishment) is the tide that lifts the boats of *tefillah* and *chesed*. Proper *teshuvah* is the single most transformational act of free will and, as such, elevates all *mitzvos*, including our *tefillas* and acts of *chesed*.

we recall a passage in the Zohar that states that acts of righteousness and lovingkindness are done “above the sun,” outside of time and space.¹²³

RESHUFFLING THE DECK

Imagine a rocket ship heading to the moon. At takeoff, a minor course correction—a fraction of a degree—in the coordinates can save the craft from going hundreds of miles off course. At the beginning of its flight, minor adjustments affect significant changes. However, once the craft approaches its destination, even larger deviations—that is, efforts—prove less meaningful.

The longer an unpleasant situation is allowed to fester, the more effort it will take to repair the damage. Consider a person with an infection. He may eat better, get more rest, and quickly recover. But if he doesn’t take care of himself, he might have to take medication. If he goes untreated, then the infection might damage his organs and he may need surgery. The earlier he takes action to stop the progression of the affliction, the easier it is to cure and the better chances he has of a complete recovery.

God works through nature; the more visible the reality, the greater the merit one needs for God to grant him a miracle that alters the natural unfolding of events. (See the following chapter where *Chazal* discuss that one who enters his granary to assess what he has accumulated should pray that his work receives blessing, but only before he starts to measure the grain.) When we rise above our nature, God supersedes nature in a concealed way. For those who are on an even higher spiritual level, God will alter nature to produce a miracle, even where it is an apparent violation of the natural order.¹²⁴ As *Chazal* explain, “God

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123. See *Zohar* II:59a.

124. Some commentators maintain that for the truly righteous, God may shroud a miracle in nature to avoid any disruption to the *tzaddik*. See *Shabbos*

decrees but a *tzaddik* can revoke the decree,” for such a person has the *zechus* (“spiritual merit”) to do so.¹²⁵

When reality has yet to emerge, less merit and effort are required to influence conditions. “Had you arranged your prayer before the onset of difficulty, then all would fortify your strength.”¹²⁶ On this, our Sages teach, “Always pray before tragedy strikes.”¹²⁷

In times of crisis, it is common for people to make a *kabbalah* (“accepting something positive upon oneself”). We pray to God and perhaps we promise Him that we will do something specific should our prayers be answered, because intuitively we know what He wants from us and what we need to do—we just don’t want to do it. The question we need to ask ourselves is, “What are we waiting for?”

God has given us an arsenal of weapons to wage war against our fate: *teshuvaah*, *tefillah*, and *tzedakah*. Why wait until a painful reality has already begun to materialize before we are provoked into action? In the words of the familiar English axiom: “An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.”¹²⁸

It is once again crucial to remind ourselves that even when we cannot annul a decree, we can make the bitter pill more palatable

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53b, which discusses the case of a newly widowed father and the miracle produced for his nursing infant.

125. *Moed Katan* 16b.

126. *Job* 36:19.

127. See *Sanhedrin* 44b.

128. Rashi quotes a parable from the *Midrash (Sifra)* to explain: “You shall strengthen him” (referring to a person who is in need). He writes, “Do not leave him alone so that he descend and fall, for it will be hard to raise him up. Rather, support him from the time his hand slips. To what might this be compared? To a burden on a donkey: While it is still on the donkey, one person can grab it and set it straight. But if it falls to the ground, even five people cannot put it back on.”

and perhaps, for the person who chooses to be extraordinary, turn it into a lavish feast. *Mazal* affects happenstance, but as we learned in Chapter 8, “Life in Context,” we have the final say on our happiness. The emotional laws of free will—including, most important, life satisfaction—run on the track of reward and punishment (*hanhagas hamishpat*), which is always a function of choice. Life’s challenges are not equally distributed, but the power of choice is the great equalizer.

PART 6

BEHIND THE
CURTAIN OF
DIVINE PROVIDENCE

Seeing the Oneness of God, being closer to Him, confers a host of benefits that have been explained. In the following chapters, we delve more deeply into how it affords us Divine protection, changing God's actual supervision of us. To best understand this, we explore how contrasting realities coexist without contradiction in a single framework and how our perspective influences our *objective* reality.



18 | A QUANTUM STATE

The Sages write, “All is foreseen, yet freedom of choice is granted.”¹ From here, the classic question emerges: If God is Omniscient and knows what we’re going to do, can it really be said that we have free will?” We cannot, of course, surprise God, Who is Infinite and All-Knowing.

Because we are locked into time and space, it is problematic for us to see how Divine knowledge does not preclude human free will, but let us consider an analogy. If we place a lollipop and a piece of baked tofu before a small child, we could easily predict which he will choose. Can we say that we denied him his free will? He is free to choose, and we reasonably assume what his choice will be.

Now, what happens if we put before this same small child a green lollipop and an orange one? Can we still guess which he will reach for? It would be harder to know, unless we happen to be aware that orange is his favorite flavor. Our ability to know what he will do is dependent on our knowledge of the child. Since God’s knowledge of us is absolute and complete, the number of variables becomes irrelevant. Because He knows us, He knows

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1. Ethics of the Fathers 3:16.

what we will do. From our vantage, we face a decision; from His, the outcome is known.

While nothing is hidden from God, we should emphasize that it is not His knowledge of us that reveals our choice, but His knowledge, period. As we observed earlier, the Rambam explains that the nature of God and His knowledge are not two separate things. God's knowledge *is* Who He is, unlike human beings whose knowledge is separate from us.² God Himself proclaims, "The nature of My thoughts are not your thoughts."³

The Rambam explains five ways that God's knowledge is different from our own: (1) One idea encompasses all of the different ideas. (2) He can understand that which doesn't exist yet. (3) His knowledge encompasses the infinite. (4) God's knowledge of future events does not mean that He will make them happen. (5) God's knowledge does not change as new events develop, since He knew about them before they happened.⁴ Elsewhere, he writes,

The Holy One, Blessed Be He, knows everything that will happen before it has happened... . [T]he Holy One, Blessed Be He, does not have any temperaments and is outside such realms, unlike people, whose selves and temperaments are two separate things. God and His temperaments are one, and God's existence is beyond the comprehension of Man... . [Thus,] we do not have the capabilities to comprehend how the Holy One, Blessed Be He, knows all creations and events. [Nevertheless] know without doubt that people do what they want without the Holy One, Blessed Be He, forcing or decreeing upon them to do so... . It has been said because of this that a man is judged according to all his actions.⁵

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2. See Rambam, *Hilchos Yesodei HaTorah* 2:10.

3. Isaiah 55:8.

4. Rambam, *Guide for the Perplexed* (3:20).

5. Rambam, *Mishneh Torah, Teshuvah* 5:5 [32]. This approach is favored by the

A SPACE IN TIME FOR FREE WILL

Free will does not cease to exist because God has knowledge of what will happen. His foreknowledge of an event does not in any way impinge upon our freedom of choice.^{6a} The paradox of God’s knowledge and our free will exists only from a perspective inside time, while in true reality, God is outside of time. Past, present, and future are part of our reality, not His.^{6b}

A slightly modified position posits that free will events are actually unpredictable to God, but that His knowledge remains absolute for the same reason: Whatever occurs at any time during the existence of the universe is known to God at any other time, including a prior time.^{6c}

The distinction between these two positions is subtle but significant. The former opinion asserts that everything that will ever transpire is known to God, even before creation—because God, Who is Infinite, is not separate from His knowledge. Thus, His knowledge must be infinite—complete and absolute, and nothing can ever be unknown to Him. The latter opinion is slightly

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majority of early commentators, such as: (1) Rabbi Saadia Gaon who writes, “God knows in advance what human choices will be, but his knowledge is not the cause of those choices” (*Emunot v’Deot* 4:2); and (2) the Rivash (*Responsa* 118) who similarly writes the God’s foreknowledge is not causative. Indeed, the following chapter introduces a compelling insight into the nature of time and causation.

6a. The question of causality is satisfied, but does a question of compulsion remain? In other words, God’s knowledge of the future does not interfere with free will, but does it preclude us from making any other choice? Are we free to deviate from what is known? In short, if we are forced to choose X when we want to choose Y, we can agree that we are compelled, but when we are free to choose between X and Y (desire coming *first*), then the choice is independent, and our decision is not forced, but rather enforced.

6b. Although time exists, physicists explain that there is no objective flow of time; rather, we flow through time. Time is just another dimension, and all points in time are equally real—past, present, and future—in every moment.

6c. See Avi Rabinowitz, “The Retroactive Universe,” referencing a *Responsa* of Rabbi Hai Gaon, a medieval commentator. God’s sacred name, the

restrictive and maintains that God has knowledge of events because He is beyond time, and anything that happens inside of time becomes known to Him at any point in time. Accordingly, before creation or more precisely, before the creation of time, a free will event may actually have been unpredictable to Him, but the instant He created time, His knowledge of all future events—free will and otherwise—became known.

The unrestricted view represents the mainstream position, with a small branch adopting the time-sensitive model. An alternate approach to the paradox acknowledges God’s omnipotence, but suggests that He chooses to withdraw from pockets of creation in order to allow free choice to emerge.⁷ A dizzying array of nuanced opinions, disputes, and contradictions abound, none of which moves us closer to a consensus. Rather than parse each argument and counter-argument, we will highlight two of the early commentators (*Rishonim*) who favor this minority view.

The Ralbag adopts a radical solution by suggesting that free will can exist only if God holds back, as it were. He asserts that Divine foreknowledge precludes free will and thus God knows that certain states of affairs may or may not be actualized but He chooses to “not know” which of the alternatives will happen.⁸ (This should not be confused with the above-stated view which holds that even though a particular choice may be unknown to God—before the creation of time—at no point *in time*, does He ever lack knowledge of what that choice is, or will be.)

The Raavad states that God does know the particular choices of man but that His foreknowledge is acquired through

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Tetragrammaton, YKVK, includes the past, present, and future tense of the Hebrew word “to be.”

7. This position invokes a phenomenon referred to by the Kabbalists as *tzimtzum* (“contraction”), which is discussed in Chapter 36, “The Ladder of Harmony.”

8. *Milchemes HaShem* (The Wars of the Lord) Book 3: Divine Knowledge.

less-than-Divine means. He writes, “God has limited this power from His hand and given the power [of free will] to man, His knowledge is not a decree but rather like the knowledge of the astrologers who know [from the constellations] what shall be the way of this person.”⁹ He then adds a Divine component to God’s supervision. “God also gave man the power of reason to enable him to release himself from the power of the stars to be either good or bad. God knows the power of the stars and if the person has the will to extricate himself from its power or not, and this knowledge is not a decree.” After he offers what he calls his “partial solution” to the question, he writes that even his own answer, “is hardly satisfactory to me.”¹⁰

Naturally, any attempt to reconcile the paradox by limiting God’s knowledge, in any way, has been met with fierce and vehement objection by other *Rishonim*. We must stress however, that there is complete agreement in both God’s omnipotence and in human free will. The point of contention lays here: The majority hold that outside of time and space, foreknowledge does not interfere with free will, while the minority maintain that God voluntarily withdraws or constricts His “higher-knowledge” — which is synonymous with an irreversible decree — so that free will can exist. How much “lower-knowledge” God has of future events is a source of further dispute amongst those in the latter camp, while no such issue exists for those in the majority.

Following the mainstream view, we will now investigate how freedom of choice can exist within a known reality, and why this is so; not *in spite* of God being outside of time, but *because* He is.

DUELING REALITIES

Let us refine our inquiry. We need not address God’s

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9. *Hilchos Teshuvah*, 5:5.

10. *Ibid.*

knowledge of our actions that lie above or below the point of *bechirah*, because these areas are not under the domain of free will. Free will emerges only where a person’s awareness of the truth, that is, what is right, is not overwhelmed by a competing desire. Along the battlefield where free will exists, hovering in between truth and falsehood, the two outcomes are equally viable—with only our free will tipping the balance.¹¹

In the physical universe, this very phenomenon occurs where two possible outcomes coexist. The overarching theme of wave-particle duality is that all subatomic matter appears as opposites—as both a particle and a wave.¹² (It is interesting to note that each of the *Sefiros*—the ten emanations through which God interacts with creation—can appear in both circular *iggulim*, and *yosher*, straight or upright, form.)¹³ Research in quantum mechanics explains:

The universe, or any subsystem of it, is capable of being in two (or more) mutually contradictory states simultaneously. Saying that the universe is uniquely in one state is just as invalid as saying that it is in the other state. Until the measurement [defined as observation by human consciousness] is made both views are only partially correct since the state is actually a combination. After the measurement only one becomes correct. However, this does not imply that it was always the correct one; there was no “correct” state until the measurement was made.¹⁴

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11. See Dessler, *Strive for Truth*, Vol. 1, 111–120. To say that two choices are equally viable does not mean that they are equally balanced. See Chapter 24, “The Battlefield” for a more complete understanding of the free will battlefield.

12. Light, too, can behave like a wave and be labeled with a wavelength, a frequency, and a velocity, but it also has a certain amount of energy and momentum. In those respects, it resembles a particle.

13. See Chapter 36, “The Ladder of Harmony” for further discussion of the *Sefiros*.

14. Avi Rabinowitz, “The Retroactive Universe: Quantum Kabbalistic

At the quantum level, reality itself exists in a state of flux and materializes into one or the other form only *after* it is observed—and based on the perspective of the observer (this is called wave function collapse because it “collapses” potential realities into a single, unique reality). For this reason, the observer cannot observe anything without changing what he sees.

Chazal discuss that one who enters his granary to assess what he has accumulated should pray that his work receives blessing. “May it be Your will, O Lord our God, to send a blessing upon the work of our hands.” Once the grain is visible and no longer hidden he should say, “Blessed is God Who sends blessing upon this store.” Otherwise the blessing is in vain because our Sages explain that blessing rests only on that which is concealed from the eye.¹⁵

Measurement—by means of the subjective perception of a human observer—causes a collapse of the probability and effectively brings the object into a specific, quantifiable existence. Before that happens, reality is a supposition of possible outcomes (and, as noted, where prayer is most potent).

Yes, God has knowledge of all events—past, present, and future—so what does it matter that physical reality is defined through human perspective? The answer is that perspective is a function of time and space, which God is beyond. Hence, His knowledge cannot be causative because perspective is the causative agent. God does not “interfere” through His observation. Perspective requires an observer and the observed. When they are One-and-the-Same, we shift beyond the definition of perspective to an all-encompassing reality. This is why He sees and knows all but does not hinder free choice. With man, it is different. Perspective does not make us see reality differently.

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Cosmology & the Meaning and Purpose of Life, Mind, Free Will & the Garden of Eden” (1993). Retrieved: https://files.nyu.edu/air1/public/RetroactiveUniverse.htm#_ftn294.

15. *Ta’anis* 8b. “God shall command the blessing upon you in your hidden things” (Deuteronomy 28:8).

On a quantum level, in a completely tangible way, it determines our reality.

Accordingly, our Sages explain that creation was not a “one-time event” but that God brings all of reality into existence each and every moment.¹⁶ We therefore do not “undo” anything in creation, but rather facilitate its actual formation and revelation.

SLICES OF TRUTH

The basis of concurrent, even incompatible, realities existing within one reality is embedded into the building blocks of creation. Regarding the *Sefiros* the oldest and most influential Kabbalistic work reads, “Ten *Sefiros* of Nothingness; ten and not nine; ten and not eleven.”¹⁷ The *Sefirah* of *Keser* (“Crown”) is not always counted, and when we include it, we omit the *Sefirah* of *Da’as* (“Knowledge”). If we were to preclude or include both simultaneously, we arrive at the erroneous conclusion of nine or eleven. The Sages emphasize that exactly ten *Sefiros* exist because in reality there are only ten—our perspective however, changes which ten come into existence at any one time.

Coexisting truths are also rooted in the Torah, which itself heralds multiple interpretations.¹⁸ This teaches that valid observations and explanations of Torah can be dependent on the outlook of the scholar. For three years, there was a dispute between *Beis*

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16. *Kedushat Levi*, Genesis. “The creative process did not cease at the end of the Six Days of Creation but continues at every moment, constantly renewing all existence.” Rabbi Nissan Mangel, *Tanya*, Bi-Lingual Edition, (New York: Kehot Publication Society), 855.

17. *Sefer Yetzirah* 1:2.

18. The *Midrash* states that there are seventy “faces” or “facets” to the Torah (*Bamidbar Rabbah* 13:15). One verse may have several meanings (*te’amim*) (*Sanhedrin* 34a; cf. *Shabbos* 88b). Torah concepts themselves are revealed on four distinct levels: *Pshat*, *Remez*, *Drush*, and *Sod* (loosely translated: Simple, Hint, Exegetical, and Secret). Each interpretation is true, even though they may appear to contradict one another.

Hillel (“the House of Hillel”) and *Beis Shammai* (“the House of Shammai”), each asserting, “The law is in agreement with our views.” Then a voice from heaven called out: “*Eilu v’eilu divrei Elokim Chayim*,” “These and those are the words of the Living God.”¹⁹ They are both right.²⁰

The Talmud relates a famous debate regarding the *halachic* status of an oven that is cut into pieces.²¹ All of the scholars agreed that it is susceptible to ritual impurity, except for the greatest amongst them: Rabbi Eliezer. He thus offered a succession of proofs to support his reasoning, but they were all refuted. Then things turned miraculous.

Rabbi Eliezer said to them, “If the law is as I say, may the carob tree prove it.” The carob tree was uprooted from its place a distance of 100 cubits. Others say, 400 cubits. They said to him, “There is no proof from a carob tree.” Rabbi Eliezer then said, “If the law is as I say, may the aqueduct prove it.” The water in the aqueduct began to flow backwards. Once again, they were not swayed. “One cannot prove anything from an aqueduct.” Finally, he said, “If the law is as I say, may the walls of the house of study prove it.” The walls of the house of study began to fall in. Rabbi Yehoshua shouted at the walls, “If Torah scholars are debating a point of Jewish law, what are your qualifications to intervene?” The walls did not fall, in deference to Rabbi Yehoshua, nor did they straighten up, in

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19. *Eruvin* 13b, *Gittin* 6b.

20. At the quantum level, we can only calculate probabilities. The means to bring into existence a single, measurable outcome from the field of probabilities—or possibilities, for those on a higher plane of consciousness—is through human observation. The greater our consciousness (and thus the smaller the ego), the greater is our ability to affect an outcome outside of probability, beyond our natural efforts, and independent of cause and effect. See Chapter 37, “A World of Contrasts” for further elaboration and an explanation as to why we follow the reasoning of *Beis Hillel*.

21. *Bava Metzia* 59a-b.

deference to Rabbi Eliezer... . Rabbi Eliezer said, “If the law is as I say, may it be proven from heaven!” A heavenly then voice proclaimed: “What do you want of Rabbi Eliezer, the law is as he says...”

The passage concludes with Rabbi Yehoshua’s bold response to the heavenly voice. He stood and proclaimed, “The Torah is not in the Heavens.” He was referencing the verse, “For this commandment which I command you today is not hidden from you nor is it distant. It is not in heaven, for you to say, ‘Who among us can go up to heaven and bring it to us so that we can listen to it and observe it? ... but it is very near to you, in your mouth and in your heart, to observe it.’”²²

The Talmud explains that the very Torah that was given to man at *Har Sinai* instructs us to follow the majority opinion.²³ Therefore, Heaven has no “right” to intervene. It is we who define reality.²⁴ Elijah the Prophet said at that moment, God smiled and said: ‘My children have triumphed over Me, My children have triumphed over Me.’”²⁵

Our finite grasp is insufficient to gain more than a fleeting glimmer of how free will shapes our reality and intersects with an outcome that is already known to God. While many commentators speak of these two seemingly contradictory principles—the free will of man and the Omniscience of God—perhaps the Rambam offers the most candid assessment: “Know that the answer to this question is

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22. Deuteronomy 30:11-14.

23. While many stipulations exist, there is a general edict that “a case must be decided on the basis of the majority” (Exodus 23:2).

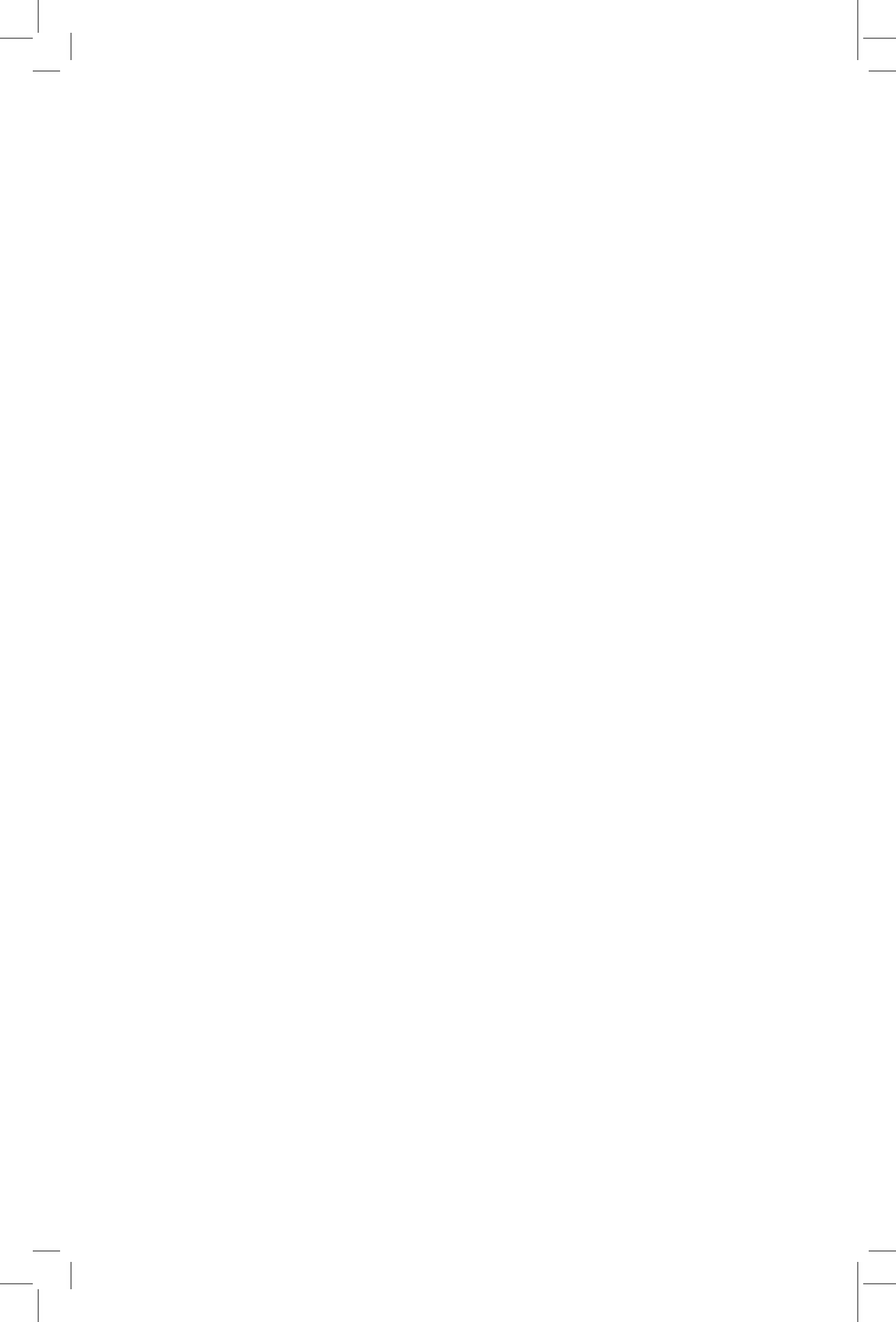
24. “God looked into the Torah and created the universe” (*Bereishis Rabbah* 1:1). The Torah not only is the blueprint *for* all of creation but the very instrument *of* creation.

25. *Bava Metzia* 59b.

longer than the earth and wider than the seas... . A human being is not able to understand this issue completely, just as he is unable to perceive the true nature of God.”²⁶

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26. Rambam, *Hilchos Teshuvah* 5:5. He adds, “[T]here are things of which the mind understands one part, but remains ignorant of the other; and when man is able to comprehend certain things, it does not follow that he must be able to comprehend everything” (ibid.). The Raavad is quite blunt, and admonishes the Rambam for bringing up the question itself. He writes, “He did not act wisely, for a person should not start something if he is unable to conclude” (ibid.).



The Hebrew word for “providence” or “supervision” is *hashgachah*. God supervises all of creation in one or a combination of two ways:²⁷

- **Hashgachah klalis** is general providence, also called *hashgachah minus* or group providence. This means that God has set into motion predetermined rules that facilitate the continued existence of every species—the laws of nature; the determination is based on the needs of the group so that it should fulfill its purpose to help man serve God (to bring forth the Final Redemption).²⁸

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27. Definitions are based on *Faith and Divine Providence*, which references the Ramchal (*Ma’amar Halkarin, On Providence*).

28. Rabbi Chaim Friedlander reminds us that these rules do not operate on their own, for it is God Who does everything; and this type of providence does not mean that any details are hidden to God or that His supervision is superficial. He writes, “It certainly makes no difference in His knowledge of events—either way He knows every single detail” (*ibid.*, 195.) Rather, he explains, “general” means that, “the determination is based on the needs of the group so that it should fulfill its purpose—which is to help man serve God and to reveal God’s glory... [However] when a particular animal or item belongs to a human, the deliberation over its existence is also influenced by the specific governance of its owner” (*ibid.*, 43).

- **Hashgachah pratis** refers to specific or individual providence, where God supervises an individual and either punishes or rewards him *middah k'neged middah* (“measure for measure”) in accord with his deeds. It is further divided into two categories: (a) Divine providence over man to know in full detail all of one’s actions and innermost thoughts; and (b) Divine providence over man to save him from the influence of chance.²⁹

The Ramchal explains that the human race was singled out to receive reward and punishment for its deeds, so its supervision is different from other species. *Hashgachah pratis* is reserved for human beings, while *hashgachah klalis* governs animals, plants, inanimate objects, and the like—although, it also extends to people. Even someone who is supervised mainly through specific providence is likewise partially supervised by general providence, because, as we explained, every person has a role in creating an environment that is conducive to the service of God.³⁰

The percentage of supervision: *hashgachah pratis* versus *hashgachah klalis* is not the same for each person. The Rambam explains that “the amount of Divine providence that governs an individual is proportionate to the share of influence that he achieves through his inborn abilities and [spiritual efforts and] accomplishments.”³¹ Simply, the closer the distance between our behavior and our potential (with respect to our unique mission in life as well as our obligation to carry out the required *mitzvos*) the closer we are to God and to specific providence.³²

The emotional and spiritual advantages of this relationship

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29. See Rabbi Bachya, Genesis 18:19.

30. See Rabbi Chaim Friedlander, *Faith and Divine Providence*, 55.

31. Rambam, *Moreh Nevuchim* 3:18.

32. See *ibid.*, Ch. 18. See also Rabbi Chaim Friedlander, *Faith and Divine Providence*, 48.

have been discussed, but now we see the inner workings of an incalculable benefit: special providence, Divine protection. Recall from Chapter 16, “Spiritual Immune System,” that nothing can harm the person who devotes his entire being to the reality that God is the One and only Power that exists.³³ Such an individual moves with near impunity.

- ❑ “A man of honesty and integrity needs no atonement. Moreover, should a faithless man seek to kill him, he himself will fall victim in his stead, and the upright man will emerge safe.”³⁴
- ❑ “[T]he Divine providence to save one from the influence of chance is not with all individuals... . God does not forsake His righteous ones, and He does not remove His sight from them; rather His Divine providence governs the pious constantly.”³⁵
- ❑ “To the point that the completely righteous person, who constantly clings to God, and never lets his thoughts be severed from Him by any worldly concern, will always be protected from all incidents—even those that occur naturally... . However, he who is distant from God in thought and deed, even if he isn’t deserving of death due to his sins, is left to chance.”³⁶

The progression of the Ramban’s position leads to a startling finale: To the extent that we fall short of our potential, we are left to the capricious winds of circumstance. While he is joined by a number of leading commentators, most compelling is that in the

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33. See *Nefesh HaChaim* 3:12.

34. Malbim, on Proverbs 21:19.

35. Rabbeinu Bachya, on Genesis 18:19.

36. Ramban, on “He will not remove His eyes from a righteous man” (Job 36:7).

Torah, God Himself states, "I will conceal My face and they will become prey."³⁷ A representation of leading positions:

- ❑ If a person does not put his trust in [God] he places his trust in something other than [God]; and whoever trusts in something other than [God, He] removes His providence from him and leaves him in the hands of whatever he trusted in.³⁸
- ❑ A lesser category of providence is the concealment of the face of [God], and, because of his sins, he is left to nature and chance ... the person is supposed to protect himself from circumstances by using natural protective measures, and he cannot rely on trust.³⁹
- ❑ As to fools who rebel [against Him] ... their interests will be loathed and will be controlled by the [natural] order as are those of animals.⁴⁰

Yet an enigmatic contradiction exists because contrasting sources assert: "No one strikes his finger down below unless it is decreed upon him above."⁴¹ The Chassidic view further advances this position with the Baal Shem Tov, who contends that not only does Divine providence involve every particular occurrence that affects man, but that it continually governs inanimate matter, plants, and animals.⁴² The Kabbalistic stance can best be synopsized with "No person who believes should entertain the concept

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37. Deuteronomy 31:17.

38. *Chovos HaLevavos (Duties of the Heart)*, Shaar HaBitachon, Introduction.

39. Ramak (*Shiur Koma*).

40. *Moreh Nevuchim*, loc. cit., Ch. 18.

41. *Chullin* 7b.

42. *Igros Kodesh* 1:94.

that any action, large or small, takes place by coincidence. Instead, everything is determined by Divine providence.”⁴³

To add to the confusion, some authorities seem to present self-contradictory viewpoints. The Ramban speaks of “naturally occurring incidents” (noted above), while simultaneously preserving the notion that there is no such thing as a chance occurrence, and that everything is Divinely ordained.⁴⁴

REVEALING REALITY

The hidden form of God’s providence is often referred to as nature (*teva*) because, to the individual, it appears to lack meaning and design.⁴⁵ The Mittler Rebbe, Rabbi Dovber of Lubavitch, explains that while God supervises and controls every aspect of every element of existence, the perceived manner in which His interaction unfolds is clothed within the workings of nature.⁴⁶ A meaningful pattern permeates the entirety of our experiences and circumstances, but the design is lost on those whose eyes are aimed at their own reflection.⁴⁷

We discussed earlier that nature is devised to reveal God’s Presence to those who have the ability to see it (leading to *he’aras panim*—“illumination of countenance”), and, at the same time, nature is designed to mask God’s Presence from those who cannot see beyond themselves (triggering *hester panim*—“the concealing of God’s ways”).

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43. Rabbi Moshe Cordovoro (*Ein Kol Tamar* 5, Ch. 1).

44. See Ramban’s commentary on Exodus (13:16).

45. Commentators observe that the word for “nature,” *hateva*, has the same *gematria* (“numerical value”) as *Elokim*—86—God the All-Powerful, which is the name that means “Master of all forces.”

46. See *Derech Chayim, Shaar HaTeshuvah*, Ch. 9, pp. 13a-b.

47. “Men committed to evil do not understand the justice of providence, but they who seek God understand all things” (Proverbs 28:5).

The following passages are traditionally interpreted in this way. In the Torah, God states, “[If] you behave casually with Me, then I, too, will behave toward you with casualness.”⁴⁸ And in the *Midrash* we read, “When you are My witnesses—declares the Lord—then I am God. But when you are not My witnesses, then I am, as it were, not God.”⁴⁹

SHIFTING REALITIES

Other authorities push past this view and explain that the inability to see the hand of God does more than obscure the meaning—it changes the meaning. Recall from the previous chapter that perspective endows reality. A deeper look at the phenomenon reveals a related principle called *retroactive causality*, where there is not only a blurring between cause and effect, but rather the effect can be—and thus can predate—the cause. This is nothing new. More than two thousand years earlier, the Gemara first taught us that God creates the cure before the disease.⁵⁰

Returning to the field of quantum physics, Dr. John Wheeler, one of the world’s leading theoretical physicists demonstrated that, an observation *now* can cause *retroactively* the emergence into reality of an event which occurred *in the past*—regardless of whether the outcome should logically have been determined long ago.⁵¹

Another prominent researcher explains: “The precise nature of reality has to await the participation of a conscious observer. In

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48. Leviticus 26:23–24.

49. Isaiah 43:10.

50. *Megillah* 13b.

51. These findings were established using the delayed choice experiment, a variation on the standard “double-slit” experiment. See Avi Rabinowitz, “The Retroactive Universe: Quantum Kabbalistic Cosmology: the Meaning and Purpose of Life, Mind, Free Will & the Garden of Eden.”

this way, mind can be made responsible for the retroactive creation of reality."⁵² The famous Nobel Laureate Dr. Richard Feynman writes that, "all the fundamental laws of physics are reversible."⁵³ This is because on the atomic and subatomic scales, cause and effect are interchangeable and time is completely mutable.⁵⁴

Due to this phenomenon, the future can influence the past as the present influences the future. It may be correct to say, then, that events which do not appear unnecessary can become so. While in the desert, God fed the Jewish people "*manna* from heaven." But they decried it saying: "Who will feed us meat? We remember the fish that we ate in Egypt ... but now ... we have nothing ... but the *manna*."⁵⁵ Commentators note that the Jewish people could have survived without food or drink. They complained about the food and *then* they were hungry. If they hadn't voiced their objection, God would have suspended these physical needs (just as He did for Moses on *Har Sinai*). Their complaint was the cause of their affliction, not the other way around.⁵⁶

Everything God does is for a purpose. If we cannot perceive the message, then there is no reason for it. The Artist does not make use of colors for the color blind. Therefore, if one's ego so distorts reality that, regardless of the circumstance, he will not discern the meaning, then the necessity for a clearly defined message becomes irrelevant. At the same time, though, we can never claim

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52. See P. C. Davies, *God and the New Physics* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1983), 111. Cited in *ibid*.

53. Volume I: Lecture 46, "Ratchet and pawl"; section 46-1, "Order and entropy"; section 46-5.

54. This principle is significant to our discussion in the previous chapter. If a free will act in the present can redefine the past, then the paradox of man affecting change to a known future becomes slightly more digestible.

55. Numbers 11:4-6, 10. The *manna* itself is described differently in various places in the Talmud. Variances in description are due to the fact that it tasted different depending on who ate it, tasting like honey for small children, like bread for youths, and like oil for the elderly (*Yoma* 75b).

56. Rabbi Moshe Feinstein, *ad loc*.

that anything in creation is arbitrary or haphazard. In the upcoming chapters, we will explore the intricate workings of providence within the context of randomness and negligence.

Suffice it to say, whether perspective determines our reality or our experience of reality, it is nonetheless our reality. When we fail to discern meaning within a situation, aspects of, or the entirety of, the occurrence may appear (or become) unnecessary. But if at any point we awaken from our spiritual slumber and accept responsibility—via proper *teshuvah*: (a) our ego shrinks and our perspective widens, and reality is revealed; or (b) due to *retroactive causality* the shift in our perspective gives rise to a new reality.

Albert Einstein famously said, “The distinction between the past, present and future is only a stubbornly persistent illusion.” Both positions and realities—unceasing Divine providence and our being subject to circumstances—are simultaneous truths. Indeed, there is no word in *Lashon HaKodesh* for “history.” The idea of a fixed, unchanging reality does not exist. The present gives shape to the past as the future gives meaning to the present. *Chazal* state that if the end is good, then all is good—spawning the common aphorism “All’s well that ends well.”

Even when a situation loses its rich surface design, the underlying purpose of life's travails is always and forever geared toward our greatest good, as will now be explained as we shift from the realm of nature to man versus man. In the Torah we find Joseph at the mercy of his brothers, who conspire to kill him, save for one brother who objects:⁵⁷

“Let us slay him, and cast him into some pit, and we will say, ‘An evil beast has devoured him’; and we shall see what will become of his dreams... .”⁵⁸ Reuben said to them, ‘Shed no blood! Throw him into this pit in the wilderness, but lay no hand upon him.’ [He said this] intending to rescue him from their hand and return him to his father... . Then they took him and cast him into the pit.”⁵⁹

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57. Many commentators note that the brothers believed their actions to be *halachically* justified, in that they ate a meal, at peace with themselves and their decision. The Torah recounts (Genesis 37:25–27): “And they took him, and cast him into a pit... . And they sat down to eat bread.” The Zohar (1:184a) further exonerates the brothers. It states that they would not have sold Joseph despite their feelings of animosity, if not for Divine intervention which guided their reasoning (so as to begin the fulfillment of God’s covenant with Abraham).

58. Genesis 37:20.

59. *Ibid.*, 37:22, 24.

Earlier in the *parsha* (“Torah portion”), Joseph said to his brothers, “Listen to this dream I had: We were binding sheaves of grain out in the field when suddenly my sheaf rose and stood upright, while your sheaves gathered around mine and bowed down to it.’ His brothers said to him, ‘Do you intend to reign over us? Will you actually rule us?’”⁶⁰

The dreams exacerbated their animosity because they believed them to be the product of fantasy, not of prophecy. Hence: “. . . and we shall see what will become of his dreams.” In other words, killing Joseph would confirm that his dreams were not prophetic, because they would not be fulfilled—a dead man cannot rule over anyone. Reuben argued that this thinking was flawed because God may allow their free will to prevail—even if the dreams were prophetic and Joseph not deserving of death.⁶¹ (The upcoming subchapter “Blood from a Stone” addresses the contrasting position: barring a Divine decree a person is unable to cause the death of another.)

Based on this exchange, the *Zohar* states, “If a man is righteous, the Holy One, blessed be He, will do a miracle for him or sometimes he is saved by the merit of his fathers; however, once a person is in the hands of his enemies there are very few who will escape.”⁶² This is because every creature acts in accordance with its nature and the will of God, except for man. King David cries out, “Let us fall into God’s hands for His mercies are

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60. *Ibid.*, 37:5–8.

61. Rashi (*ibid.*) comments: “The pit was empty of water, but there were snakes and scorpions in it.” *Chazal* draw a distinction between killing Joseph directly and causing his (seemingly inevitable) death through snakes and scorpions. See the *Mar’eh Kohen* in *Shabbos* 22a, quoting the *Zohar*, *Vayeishev* 185a.

62. On *Parshas Vayeishev*. Reuben reasoned that while Joseph might be killed unjustifiably at the hands of their brothers, snakes and scorpions, who are subject to God’s will, would not kill Joseph if he was not deserving of death (*Igros Kodesh* 1:94., vol. 9). Alternatively, the Ramban (*Genesis* 37:22) writes that Reuben and his brothers thought that the pit was completely empty.

abundant, but let me not fall into human hands.”⁶³ Thus, there is quite a difference between an instance where we are “left to nature” and one where our own will lies in direct conflict with another person’s will. Although man’s free will cannot affect a completely righteous person, it does affect the rest of us—and this presents a quandary.

If we truly have free will, then we should be able to act against another person, even if it is not Divinely ordained, but in doing so, we might cause something to happen that is not “supposed to happen.” Then perhaps we would say that regardless of our intent and efforts, we are not truly free to act and only believe ourselves to be. Both scenarios are troubling: either free will is an illusion or God is not in ultimate control. To understand what is really happening, let us recall the two systems with which God conducts the affairs of the world:

- ❑ *Hanhagas hayichud*: The unfolding revelation of God’s glory and total unity (primary), where we have a set role and part to play in the master plan.
- ❑ *Hanhagas hamishpat*: The system of reward and punishment (secondary), where our choices dictate the consequences.

The two systems operate in tandem because when we make proper use of our free will, we complete ourselves, as discussed, and help reveal God’s Oneness. *Hanhagas hamishpat* is subordinate to *hanhagas hayichud*, because as a person proactively elevates and perfects himself, he fulfills his role in all of creation.

However, when we do not correctly use our free will, our role shifts to a *kli* (a “vehicle” or a “vessel”), and our lives are directed toward helping those who are fulfilling their primary and Divine

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63. II Samuel 24:14.

purpose.⁶⁴ The foundation of creation itself utilizes the concept of primary and secondary purpose. Rabbi Kaplan explains,

The primitive *Sefiros* represent the concept of something that God created that did not fulfill its purpose... . In a sense, however, since they were meant to shatter, they did fulfill their purpose. We can say therefore that they did not fulfill their primary purpose which was to hold light. They did fulfill their secondary purpose, however, which was to shatter.⁶⁵

As we will discuss in Chapter 37, “A World of Contrasts,” the Oneness of God will be revealed, and we will see that evil was merely an instrument used for this higher purpose. Rabbi Kaplan continues,

Evil is like the peel of a fruit or the shell of a nut. In themselves, they are useless, but they serve the secondary purpose of preserving the fruit until it is ready to be eaten.⁶⁶ The same is true of evil. It does not serve God’s primary purpose of bestowing good, but it does fulfill the secondary purpose of making it possible [by allowing for free will].⁶⁷

One of the great paradoxes is how the trajectory for all of

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64. Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler, *Strive for Truth*, Vol. 2, 75–76. “From the perspective of *hashgachah pratit*, he has no right to exist in the world, since he has not completed his share... . [He] serves as tools for the *tzaddik* who is serving God” (*Sifsei Chayim, Pirkei Emunah Ve’hashgachah* 1:27–29).

65. Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan, *Inner Space* (New York: Moznaim, 1990), 83. Rabbi Kaplan explains that the first stage of creation is called the Universe of Chaos or *Tohu*. This is a state where the Vessels, which were the primitive Ten *Sefiros*, could not contain the “Light of God” and “shattered,” giving us the concept of the “Breaking of Vessels.”

66. *Sefer HaYashar* 1, ed. Rosenthal (Berlin, 1898).

67. Kaplan, *Inner Space*, 70.

creation, God’s master plan, ultimately reconciles with the collective free will of the individual.⁶⁸ On this point, the *Zohar* teaches that God can reorganize events so that His will is carried out through agents of free choice.⁶⁹ King Solomon likewise apprises us, “A man’s legs are the guarantors to bring him to a place where God has ordained that he must be.”⁷⁰

A DEEPER LOOK

The Rambam brings the example of a wealthy person who builds a giant castle for his own enjoyment. God permitted, even choreographed, this, because one day a righteous man will stop and rest under the shade of the wall. All of the wealth of this person was Divinely routed so that one *tzaddik* would enjoy a respite from the heat. From the perspective of the traveler, the wall perfectly suits his needs—precisely and exactly. Yet how that wall came to be, the vicissitudes—twists and turns—that were required to build it, are largely insignificant. As long as the owner ignored any opportunity for growth, his primary—and perhaps sole—mission in life was reduced to building this castle.⁷¹

Providence has not been removed, but the above-referenced person moves from a state of independence—the active use of free

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68. This also applies in matters of Divine justice. See Rashi on the passage, “If a man did not lie in wait [to kill], but God caused it to come to his hand, I will appoint for you a place to which he shall flee” (Exodus 21:13).

69. *Parahas Vayeira*.

70. *Succah* 53a. World affairs will conclude according to God’s plan, independent of our actions. What is directly determined by our conduct, however, is whether we receive reward or punishment, as well as whom we lift up and whom we drag down.

71. Even if a person is a *kli*, there is always the opportunity for *teshuvah*. We are rarely used for the benefit of anyone or anything without the prospect to discern some meaning for us in our own lives. Many of life’s challenges are innately intended to foster humility, the master key to growth, which in turn, is the direct gateway to *teshuvah*.

will—to a state of dependency, where his actions no longer determine or encompass the entirety of his fate or circumstances, and he is largely dependent on how others use *their* free will. Like a generic puzzle piece, he is moved to where there is a space. This is, in part, what being left to chance means. We no longer take our place as free-willed beings whose unique essence bursts forth, but rather are corralled into an opening, to complete the larger picture.

As we discussed, the Chazon Ish explains that *bitachon* is the belief that nothing is accidental, and everything that happens is ordained by God, directed toward our highest good. This does not mean, though, that it *had to happen*. Our highest good does not operate independently of our own efforts and choices—which to an indeterminable degree determine whether or not the experience is required. In short, the fact that a challenge may have been unnecessary does not mean that it was random.⁷² Kabbalistic writings explain:

Nothing occurs by accident, without intention and Divine providence, as it is written [Leviticus 21:24]: “Then I will also walk with you in chance.” You see that even the state of “chance” is attributed to God, for everything proceeds from Him by reason of special providence.⁷³

Divine wisdom ensures that circumstances are not arbitrary—on the contrary, it is precisely God’s supervision that allows for events to unfold according to His will. However, to say that man is governed by ceaseless providence is not to say that every

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72. Because the outcome of this scenario maximizes his contribution to creation, his purpose shifts, but again, because he moves in the realm of nature, this shift did not need to occur, at this time and in this way, had the situation not presented itself.

73. *Shomer Emunim* (cited in *Shoresh Mitzvas HaTefillah*, Sec. 34).

challenge we face is unavoidable. So, can a person strike his finger down below unless it is decreed upon him above? No. Providence dictates that he cannot—and will not, but when we are left to circumstances, we may strike our finger under the watchful eye of providence. Not because it was necessary, but based on our choices it became necessary—for our reluctant good.

NOTHING SPECIAL

If we are non-distinct puzzle pieces, God can move us into any number of positions, and the narrower our perspective, the wider the net of situations that can produce the same outcome—that is, what we gain. The circumstance that we find ourselves in is only a backdrop to our growth, so as we become more attuned to our world, our ability to discern meaning requires experiences that are tailored to our perception.

We will explain with a metaphor. Let us assume that God wants two adults to “read a book” (substitute any positive behavior that leads to refinement of one’s soul/character), each for his own good, as well as for the benefit of humanity. Yet only one will actually read it, and the other will instead use it as a paperweight—which the world also needs. This is the most the second person will do with it, and because it will serve a purpose, God allows it, even facilitates it. In this way, God empowers us to actualize our potential, in spite of ourselves.

Returning to our metaphor, it is obvious that it does not matter what genre the book is, and, for that matter, any finer details—the font, the paper stock, the layout—are irrelevant. In this respect, reality is blunted, not because he is cast to nature, but because

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74. When writing to a person whose command of the language is poor, the perfect use of syntax and grammar is not altogether necessary. While our words are not random, our message may lack a degree of precision. Even if we wanted to convey a well-worded nuance, it would not be possible—not because

these variables become superfluous.⁷⁴ When we do not measure our actions toward God, then He does not measure His actions toward us. Where our perception is blurred, the precision to which God manifests circumstances is equally calibrated.

A PERFECT ECOSYSTEM

When we state that God does not measure His actions toward us, we are not stating that His actions go unmeasured. Rather, where our awareness ends, chunks, slices, or slivers of our lives are no longer for our direct good. While the font, the paper stock, and the layout may be irrelevant to us, they are perfectly meaningful and relevant within the larger context of creation.

The famous “faces–vase” drawing offers a fitting allegory to demonstrate this precept. Let us imagine that our purpose in life is



to become a beautiful black rectangle, but we fail to progress toward this form. Aspects of our life, or perhaps the entirety of our life, are used to serve others who are determined to actualize their forms. From our vantage, we are left misshapen and deformed. Our cuts—our difficult life experiences—seem haphazard and unfair. Yet every cut from our life is perfectly measured to become part of other shapes that we cannot

see—in our example, the two white faces surrounding the vase.⁷⁵ In this way, we live in a world that is both simultaneously precision-orchestrated and yet seemingly random.

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of our writing skills, but because of the recipient’s reading skills. Furthermore, if our note will go unread altogether, it makes no difference to *this person* whether or not the note is written in the first place.

75. At the risk of a too-dense metaphor, these cuts create us into a vase which then becomes our secondary use. As a result, we serve a purpose similar to the person who, in our previous example, chose to use a book as a paperweight.

Our lives do not exist in a vacuum, as evidenced by “the butterfly effect.”⁷⁶ This phenomenon is born from the prospect that a hurricane’s formation, path, and intensity may be subject to whether a butterfly had previously flapped its wings somewhere else in the world. The model is used to explain how a small change in the initial condition of a system sets off a chain of events leading to a large-scale cascade of events. The Torah alludes to this concept:

[Moses] saw an Egyptian man strike a Hebrew man, [one] of his brethren. [Moses] turned this way and that way and when he saw that no man [was watching], he smote the Egyptian and hid him in the sand.⁷⁷

Rashi explains that “turning this way and that way,” means that Moses was looking into the future to see what, if any, ripple effect would come and saw that nobody would descend from this person who would “fulfill a special purpose.”⁷⁸ In this instance, there was no meaningful good that would come from this person, and as a result, he could be killed for the immediate benefit. With no direct connection to the will of God, this person became a total instrument of fate.⁷⁹ His utter and complete lack of awareness, in combination with the circumstances, made him more useful dead than alive—the consummate *kli*.

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76. A term coined by Edward Lorenz, a mathematician and meteorologist at the famed Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Scientists explain that this effect is not simply a theoretical illustration of a mathematical principle, but a real-world occurrence. See E. J. Heller and S. Tomsovic, “Postmodern Quantum Mechanics,” *Physics Today* (1993).

77. Exodus 2:11–12.

78. See Rashi on *ibid*.

79. This scenario should not be construed as anything other than a metaphor to explain that even seemingly small events can have dramatic consequences. It is obvious that an unfathomable number of variables leading

Everything God does is orchestrated for our ultimate good. He allows us to gain—even when we do not grow—indirectly, by making us a *kli* so that good can come through us and, when necessary, without us, to maximize our *s'char* (“reward in the next world”). This is not to say, however, that this Egyptian’s death offered him next-world benefits equal to what he might have earned through the responsible use of his free will.⁸⁰ Let us explain.

SCALPEL OR SAW

The potential we unknowingly squander is not lost, because providence makes use of us and we receive *s'char*.⁸¹ In this regard, every cut from our lives is Divinely measured to become part of other shapes.⁸² When there is negligence on our part, though, we are metaphorically disfigured by indiscriminate cuts via nature and man, but we are not credited or rewarded in kind; and the more negligent we are, the less bang we get for our existential buck. It must be this way. Where is the justice, let alone the significance of free will, if God allowed for negligent

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to innumerable permutations wrinkle into the physical world, with the collective impact becoming part of a mind-numbing calculation that is beyond our comprehension.

80. The presumption is that his *mazal* did not dictate or design this path for his soul’s rectification. If his fate was sealed by his *tikkun*, then he could not have avoided this destiny, and the cut would be deemed “scalpel,” not “saw.” In fact, the great Kabbalist the Ari (Rabbi Yitzchak Luria) writes that the Egyptian’s *nefesh* was in fact a *gilgul* of Cain, and his death—particularly in this way—was necessary for his *tikkun* (*Shaar HaPesukim*, *Chumash HaAri*, *Bereishis*).

81. This is an unavoidable oversimplification of God’s administration, because numerous influences and exceptions come into play. Nonetheless, we can confidently draw a distinction between those behaviors that result from shifting circumstances, accidents, and interactions with other free-willed beings, and those that we bring upon ourselves, through willful negligence with wanton disregard for the truth.

82. While God maximizes our potential, this is a default potential. The reward

behavior to be offset by an equal gain elsewhere in creation? To reward everyone equally, regardless of their behavior, is spiritual socialism.

The question of indiscriminate cuts runs parallel to the issue of how a person can be harmed if no such decree exists, and clashes loudly with authorities who maintain that nothing happens by accident or happenstance. A careful analysis of the contested position reveals no contradiction, because all authorities agree that negligence can undermine any decree.

We recall that a person is responsible for his own personal safety, and our Sages warn us that whatever natural protection or decree was in place may be withdrawn or overridden by willful negligence.⁸³ Thus, what befalls him is not outside of what “should” befall him. He lives in the natural world and is subject to the forces of nature, which God Himself has decreed.⁸⁴ As long as we operate within our *madraigah*, our potential is preserved and accounted for, and whatever is, is as it should be.⁸⁵

Our purpose in life is coordinated with the rest of creation (as explained in the following chapter). However, should a person fall below his *madraigah*, he is considered negligent, and whatever decree is in place may be withdrawn.⁸⁶

The Ramban explains that this loss of protection is not a

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we receive as a *kli* is not commensurate with the proactive use of free will. Failure to create ourselves comes at a cost, although it is mitigated by our secondary use.

83. *Kesubos* 30a.

84. These challenges should not be assumed to be the consequence of being thrust into nature, because in some instances they may be Divinely engineered. The troubles are unnecessary, in that we brought them upon ourselves, but in some instances there is a direct, causal relationship to help us get back on track. Further discussion can be found in Chapter 14, “Agents of Adversity.”

85. *Madraigah* refers to a person’s spiritual level, denoting where a free will choice is within the scope of one’s capacity.

86. See *Kesubos* 30a.

punishment but a natural outcome of cause and effect.⁸⁷ We see how this works with the Gemara that states, “Everything is in the hands of Heaven besides [illnesses related to] cold and heat, as the verse says, ‘Cold and heat are in the path of a stubborn one, one who guards his soul will distance himself from them.’”⁸⁸ The Sages explain that failure to protect oneself from the natural elements defines negligence because it is preventable. And, as the Ramchal explains, the sin of negligence itself warrants one to be punished. He writes,

One who wishes to act without wisdom and abandon himself to danger has not trust, but recklessness. And he is a sinner in that he acts against the will of the Creator, Who desires that man protect himself. So aside from the inherent danger of the matter which he is prone to because of carelessness, he openly calls punishment down upon himself because of this sin. Thus the sin of negligence itself leads him to be punished.⁸⁹

It is no coincidence that *karcha* stems from the Hebrew word *kar* which means “cold” and has two connotations: “chance” and “spiritual impurity.” The relationship is as follows: A person who irresponsibly exposes himself to the elements—for example, cold—leaves himself subject to chance because negligence attracts spiritual impurity, which then corrodes his bond with God.

BLOOD FROM A STONE

The negligence component is less of an exception to a precision-cut reality and more of an extension of it. When a person moves so

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87. See *Moreh Nevuchim*, Vol. III, Ch. 51.

88. *Kesubos* 30a.

89. *Mesillas Yesharim*, Ch. 9.

far away from his purpose that he has no direct connection to God's will, then the good that can be accomplished with him is limited.

We will illustrate with an oversimplified and extreme scenario. Let us say that Person A runs into person B, who wants to kill him. While an indeterminable number of factors come into play, not the least of which is *mazal* and active Divine providence, for illustrative purposes we will imagine that both people are operating without any protection, and all decrees that were in place have been withdrawn. This dynamic is radically different than a situation where one person becomes a *kli* to help another fulfill his primary purpose. Here, both people have opted out.

In such an instance, God allows both of them to serve as a *kli* for the expression of free will, which contributes to the collective coffers of revelation, because free will is the linchpin in God's revelation.⁹⁰ In other words, a person's total default position is to facilitate the open display of free will—which means that God allows for us to act freely (except where noted) with genuine real-world impact and consequences.

This hierarchy preserves the canon of God's complete providence while maintaining the integrity of free will, and allows God to stay hidden in nature—fostering the illusion of an independent natural world. In a situation that is rich with irony, those who abdicate their individual free choice allow for its very existence and emergence. In this respect, even challenges brought about through negligence are part of a larger cosmic order, but our lowly, self-determined place in this order makes a mockery of our lives.⁹¹

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90. See Chapter 36, "The Ladder of Harmony."

91. In addition to maintaining the spiritual infrastructure of good and evil, the Rambam (Introduction to *Zeraim*) explains that the majority of people—those who have no direct connection to the will of God—serve as necessary cogs in the wheel of society. They provide a physical framework for the righteous to sustain their spiritual endeavors.

Practically speaking, should we live our lives completely antithetical to Torah values, thus forsaking all hope of the soul's refinement, the argument of whether or not providence exists becomes theoretically unnecessary—because the net reality to us is the same.

Whether we want to say that a suit is poorly made (because nature is the craftsman) or tailor-made to fit poorly (because the Craftsman is God), we end up wearing a poor-fitting suit through nobody's fault but our own.

At this level of existence, there is no tangible difference between providence and randomness. When a person descends into absolute nature, his conduct brings no real value to his *neshamah* or to creation. Short of *teshuvah*, there is nothing he could do that would outrank the benefit of being used as a *kli* to openly demonstrate cause and effect in the physical world. God may still advocate for his good, but without any soul-oriented awareness or drive, the most providence can offer is to allow him to live—and die—in nature. (We should reiterate that “to die” in nature does not necessarily mean a physical death, and that success in the natural world may come with a steep spiritual price tag.)

When it comes to human beings the bottom line is this: When there is complete and total negligence, the ripple effect of one's actions is rarely significant enough to pull us out of the natural order, but the fact that this prospect is included in the equation is central to the legitimacy of a fully integrated system. Certainly, nature does not operate independent of God. He knows all and supervises every aspect in creation down to the tiniest detail, but He will not position this person for another use, or otherwise intervene, unless a greater good is achieved.

When a person fails to use his given strengths to maximize his potential and fulfill his mission, he becomes an instrument to help

others who are making proper use of their free will. The ultimate goal of creation is to reveal God's glory. "All is from God, and serves to reveal His Godliness, wisdom and attributes."⁹² Few will do this with proactive use of their free will, and the rest will assist those who do. In the words of Ralph Waldo Emerson, "All history is but the lengthened shadow of a great man."

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92. Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Vitebsk, *Pri HaAretz (Bo)*. Truly evil people become an unqualified *kli* in God's master plan, but in a narrow sense, they have greater reign than the sick or foolish. This is not an aberration in God's administration, but only appears so, because the rules are upside down from our perspective. Evil makes proper use of its free will when it maximizes its potential, which is to bring itself—evil—into the world.

