

God's intervention in the natural order is a matter of much discussion and more confusion. Before we continue our explanation of *when* God intervenes and what "the greater good" means, let us present a streamlined synopsis to explain *how* God intervenes.

Advancing one opinion is the Ramban, who holds that the natural order, which continues most of the time, uninterrupted via cause and effect, allows for periodic disruption—for example, miracles, by way of Divine providence. Nonetheless, because nature does not operate independently from God, he deems everything a miracle—some hidden in nature and others open and patently miraculous.

Others, led by the Rambam, contend that all events, even seemingly miraculous ones, are not just cloaked in reality but have been encoded into largely immutable laws set into motion by God.⁹³ So much so, that he also maintains that all of the miracles that were to occur—the parting waters of the *Yam Suf* ("Red Sea") the stalled sun of Yehoshua, and so forth—were built

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93. We reemphasize that neither he nor any other authority suggest that God is ever on the sidelines. While the nonphysical universe has preset laws similar to those of the physical universe, nothing in creation operates independently of God. He knows all and interacts and intercedes as He chooses.

into the natural laws during the six days of Creation—or shortly thereafter, during dusk immediately prior to Shabbos.⁹⁴ Just as there are physical laws that are true, universal, and absolute, there are spiritual laws with clearly defined consequences. We simply activate them in ways that are not always clear to us—so they seem less constant or universal.

The disagreement narrows because the Rambam contends that Divine providence—which appears to interfere with the natural order—is itself a natural process. Simply, the natural order was created to allow for preplanned deviations—even miraculous ones—based on a person’s conduct. The reasoning is thus: Miracles, which are a function of Divine providence, are set in motion by man’s actions, via his free will. Such actions have designated, preexisting consequences (based on an established system of reward and punishment) that are enacted.

While the Rambam maintains that individual providence depends on the activity, not on the person, we can consider that cause and effect are not limited to the act, but also rely on the person—yet do not require direct providence. In other words, these laws apply to all in the same way, all things (people) being equal. But because each circumstance is unique, they are applied differently—not because they vary, but because we do.

For example, the laws of gravity are abundantly obvious when an apple falls from a tree. Can we say that the laws change because one apple falls slower or faster, or that one apple sinks into the ground, while another bounces, collides with other apples, and then rolls down a hill? The height of the tree, the texture of the apple, wind conditions, surrounding apples, moisture levels,

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94. The Meiri (Menachem Meiri [1249–1310], a famous Catalan rabbi and Talmudist) tweaks this opinion by suggesting that these miracles were not actually embedded into creation but existed in potential—part of the flow-chart design but not programmed to be automatically enacted. This position is supported by an hypothesis in physics known as the *multiple world theory*.

and so on, all go into this computation. But the computation is fixed, while the variables are near-infinite. In our loose metaphor, providence (according to the Rambam) does not mean that God is intervening, but rather, such calculations are built into the laws of nature.

Since we are speaking of human beings, who have a unique mission, another dimension must be considered. That is, who the “apple” is. Therefore, one’s spiritual DNA—specifically, *tikkun* and *mazal*—is integrated into this “gravity algorithm.” The remaining sticking point in the calculation are free will choices—about which the Ramban maintains that Divine providence must come into the equation, while the Rambam would insist that no such intervention is required because the free will choice, too, is contained within the schemata. When we consider, though, that from God’s perspective (outside of time and space), everything that will happen has already happened, we can, at least conceptually, bridge the two positions.

THE MAZAL OF NATURE

The above-stated opinions represent two sides of the same coin, but then along came a new coin. The early commentators (*Rishonim*)—the rabbinic scholars between the eleventh and the sixteenth century—who include both the Rambam and the Ramban, hold that nature operates largely independently, though under God’s absolute authority. This thinking continued up until the late 1700s, when the latter commentators (*Achronim*) advanced a more direct, hands-on interpretation of *hashgacha*.

The respective position also establishes the meaning of the previously-noted *hester panim* (“the concealing of God’s ways”). The *Rishonim* define *hester panim* as an actual concealment of God’s Presence and the emergence of a natural order. The *Achronim* assert that *hester panim* only mirrors the natural world, but events are actively directed by God. This then leads into the next question:

How natural is nature when it has nothing to do with man? Does a leaf fall from a tree with any wisdom or decree? The *Rishonim*, of course, hold that the natural world—and its physical properties and laws—serves only as a backdrop for free will. The Rambam writes, “I do not believe that a particular leaf has fallen because of Divine providence; or that this spider has devoured this flea because God has now decreed... . For all this is in my opinion due to pure chance.”⁹⁵

Thus far, he would appear to have physics on his side because, as we discussed, quantum mechanics concedes a degree of unpredictability in the universe. However, a contrasting opinion—held mostly by the Kabbalists and Chassidim—maintains that nothing in creation is by chance—every blade of grass, every grain of sand, is where it is, because God wills it so.

The early Chassidic master Rabbi Pinchas of Koretz observes that “...a man should believe that even a piece of straw that lies on the ground does so at the decree of God. He decrees that it should lie there with one end facing this way and the other end the other way.” A later authority, Rabbi Hayyim Halberstam, similarly states,

It is impossible for any creature to enjoy existence without the Creator of all worlds sustaining it and keeping it in being, and it is all through Divine providence. Although the Rambam has a different opinion in this matter, the truth is that not even a bird is snared without providence from above.⁹⁶

Moreover, the *Midrash* tells us: “Even things which you may regard as completely superfluous to the creation of the world, such as fleas, gnats and flies, even they are included in the creation of the world and the Holy One carries out the Divine purpose

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95. *Moreh Nevuchim* 3:17.

96. *Divrei Hayyim* (New York: 1962), “Mikketz”, 13d, Arabic no. 26.

through everything.”⁹⁷ Our Sages also remind us, “Do not scorn any person and do not disdain anything; for there is no person who does not have his hour, and there is no thing that does not have its place.”⁹⁸

Enter another quantum mechanics theorem, the *Pauli Exclusion Principle*, which states that electrons cannot occupy the same quantum state simultaneously.⁹⁹ In simple terms, every electron, in every atom, everywhere in the universe is at a slightly different energy level and changing the energy of electrons in an object—even in a benign way, such as by warming it up—leads to changes in all electron energy levels in the universe.

Indeed, if a butterfly flapping its wings can stir the formation of a hurricane in another part of the world, is it so illogical that a falling leaf may be of greater consequence than we typically assume? Of course, reason informs us that some connections are more direct and stronger than others, and in the scheme of things, some things matter more than others, but a deep question emerges: When everything is connected to not just something else, but to everything else, does a concept of chance exist? To help answer this question, we will examine another set of contrasting sources:

- The *Midrash* states, “There is not a blade of grass that does not have a *mazal* [or constellation] in heaven that strikes it and says, ‘grow!’”¹⁰⁰

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97. *Bereishis Rabbah* 10:7.

98. Ethics of the Fathers, 4:3. “Nothing exists that isn’t for some higher purpose, i.e., to reveal God’s glory. The reason for this is that nothing exists that doesn’t have a spiritual root above. This includes things that are covered by many layers of ‘garments’ and therefore seemingly totally removed from—and even antithetical—to Godliness” (*Teferet HaChinukhi, Parshas Vayeira*).

99. The principle applies to fermions (particles that obey the *Exclusion Principle*) which include protons, neutrons, and electrons—the three types of elementary particles that constitute matter.

100. *Bereishis Rabbah* 10:6.

- The *Zohar* states, “There is not a blade of grass that does not have an angel who is appointed to look after it and strikes it and tells it to ‘grow!’”¹⁰¹

Elsewhere, the *Zohar* illuminates the spiritual mechanics behind these two statements: “There is no blade of grass in the entire world that is not ruled by a star and constellation in heaven, and over that star there is one official appointed over it that serves before the Holy One. These are the angels.”¹⁰² God’s providence works through the angels, and these angels, in turn, work through the stars and planets.¹⁰³ The Rambam echoes these sentiments.

Everything that comes into being in this lower world—namely, every “living soul” and every tree and every species of grass and every one of the species of minerals—the whole has the Deity as its maker, through a power coming from the spheres and the stars. And they are in accord that the power of the Creator flows first upon the spheres and the stars; from the spheres and the stars it flows and spreads through this (lower) world—everything that is, thereby coming into being.¹⁰⁴

Kabbalists explain it thusly: Divine energy flows through four worlds which terminate in the physical universe. *Atzilus* (“the

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101. *Zohar* 1:34a.

102. *Terumah* 171b.

103. Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan, Commentary on *Sefer Yetzirah*.

104. “Letter on Astrology.” Cited by Isadore Twersky, *A Maimonides Reader* (New York: Behrman House, Inc., 1972), 463-47. Many themes swirl behind the scenes of Divine providence, such as the Land of Israel and God’s use of angels in His supervision. While these areas are important to explore, our focus is limited to aspects that intersect directly with our free will. We should underscore, however, that God does not need intermediate mechanisms—angels, constellations, and the like—nor are they imbued with any authority that can ever deliberately contravene the will of God.

world of emanation”) is the plane of the ten *Sefiros*; *Beriyah* (“the world of creation”) is the realm through which the influence of the *Sefiros* is directed down to *Yetzirah* (“the world of formation”)—the domain of angels; they in turn influence the constellations in *Assiyah* (“the world of action”), which then affects everything in our world.

Crucial to our understanding is that the laws of nature and the course of nature are in accord with the will of God, because the natural world is synchronized with our *mazal*. (The Rambam’s reference to “pure chance” does not include events that concern man, even though he and others hold that man, too, can be subject to chance—the definition of which, is open to much debate.)

The extent of synchronization between the natural world and man is also in dispute—as is God’s use of intermediaries and part and parcel, whether His will is actively or passively expressed, for whom, and how often. In broad strokes, the three major positions are as follows:

1. Significant events: (*tikkun*-related) with everything else subject to chance.
2. Major events and interactions: (*tikkun*-related plus soft *mazal*-related [see following chapter]) with everything else subject to chance.
3. All interactions: since all of creation impacts man, everything in creation—both animate and inanimate—is synched with humanity). Nothing is subject to chance.¹⁰⁵

Following the common denominator of a synthesized approach, if we are living our lives in accord with our purpose in life,

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105. These authorities maintain that God creates the universe anew every moment, and nature, while governed by *mazal* is directed through active Divine Providence for all people and—according to a subset opinion—toward all of creation.

then *mazal* dictates that the bulk of our experiences and certainly pivotal episodes are perfectly necessary (fine-tuned to one’s level of awareness). This is how life operates for most people, those who live within the margins of their *madraigah*. They have their role in God’s plan, cloaked in the natural order of the universe, which itself is reflected in the stars—or *mazal*.¹⁰⁶

The function of a decree is to assure the expression of a person’s *mazal*, guaranteeing—to the extent that we do our part—those experiences that are necessary. Essentially, if we are “doing our jobs,” then nothing of significance can happen to us that is not supposed to happen. In this way, the Talmud tells us, God has many messengers to carry out His will. This is what Joseph implied when he revealed himself to his brothers: “I am Joseph your brother. You sold me to Egypt. But don’t worry or feel guilty because you sold me, for God has sent me ahead of you to save lives... . It is not you who sent me here, but God.”¹⁰⁷

If Person B is living in accordance with his purpose, then Person A cannot do to him what is not decreed—regardless of person A’s spiritual station. *Mazal* assures this.¹⁰⁸ In addition, as long as Person A is acting within his *madraigah*, he also cannot do anything to Person B (no matter how deserving Person B may be) that is not within his own (Person A’s) *mazal*. Generally speaking,

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106. There is much written on the Torah view of astrology, the particulars of which, are beyond the scope of our discussion. However, the overriding *halachah* is most pertinent: It is forbidden to be superstitious, or to engage in, or inquire of, a practitioner of sorcery, fortune-telling, astrology, and horoscopes (Leviticus 19:26; Deuteronomy 18:9-12). The Sages explain that we must place our trust in God, and not in any lesser force.

107. Genesis 45:1-11.

108. See Chapter 14, “Agents of Adversity” for two exceptions: (1) where we reference the Talmud (*Bava Kamma* 60a), “Once permission has been given to the Destroyer to destroy, he does not distinguish between the righteous and the wicked;” and (2) this unique period in history, referred to as *ikvos d’Meshichah* (“footsteps of the Messiah.”) See also subchapter “Final Redemption” in Chapter 25 “Unperceived Influences,” for a nuanced qualification.

we cannot act in any way to ourselves or to others that will render us incapable of fulfilling our purpose.^{109a}

Therefore, nature's incursion into humanity is not the issue; neither is its contact with those governed under active *hashgachah pratis*. God gives Divine permission for nature to "take its course" and to operate as is, unless and until it impedes on those governed under *hashgachah pratis*; because those operating within their *madraigah* are governed by *mazal*, which functions within the system of nature; and complete negligence deactivates our *mazal* and our purpose is absorbed into the natural world.

This explanation helps us to integrate the Chassidic view, which, as we will recall, maintains that even nonhumans operate under Divine providence. Inanimate matter, plants, and animals, of course, do not possess free will, and as such, their existence does not depend on their deeds; a system of reward and punishment requires the possibility of choice. Rather, the providence they receive is not unlike that of a human who is reduced to a *kli*, in how they affect all of creation.

When a particular animal or item belongs to—or affects—a human, its status is determined by the specific governance of the person. It is covered under an umbrella policy, in a manner of speaking. It is correct to conclude that a piece of straw will at times be given special providence, while God may permit a human being to be swept up by a force of nature.

PERFECTLY RANDOM

The above discussion is not meant to button up and an existential debate because the crux of the issue remains: How do

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109a. We cannot resort to the pseudo-logic that says: Since a person who lives life above his *madraigah* is not subject to randomness, I am not responsible for whatever I do to him because all that befalls him is decreed. This mentality is ludicrous because we can never know where a person's *madraigah* rests.

we define *chance* and *nature* when it comes to human beings? It is indisputable that everything transpires according to the will of God. But does this mean that: (a) His precise will is carried out through nature, even when a person lacks awareness or is outright negligent (in which case we are left with the unsettling assumption that God not only permits the expression of evil but also directs it), or (b) His will is for man to be subject to the laws of nature. If the latter, is it conceivable or completely heretical to imagine that *chance* could mean more than the unpredictable—that something may truly happen randomly?

Re-examination of a fundamental concept acquaints us with a third option. We have established that reality is keyed into our level of awareness (our free will choices determine our perspective, and our perspective defines our reality).

Although God presents a range of potential outcomes—within the bounds of nature and confined to our *mazal/tikkun* when applicable—it is *we*, not God, who bring definitive form to the world around us. This is His will—for us to complete, to perfect, creation.

By definition, a free will event is not based on any specific cause (explained further in Chapter 24, “The Battlefield”). If something were to compel us in one direction over another, the outcome would not be free but rather a function of factors which lead us to an inevitable conclusion.

Free will shares a conspicuously similar definition to *chance* (the unknown and unpredictable element in happenings that seems to have no assignable cause) because what we call *chance* is none other than an unmeasured consequence of

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Furthermore, each person is responsible for his own actions, and we are held liable because we did not have to choose to be the messenger of fate. Regarding the period of Egyptian slavery, the Rambam says that while a decree on the Jewish people was enacted, each Egyptian citizen had the choice to not contribute to the oppression (*Hilchos Teshuvah* 6:5).

our free will choices; or possibly even a direct impression of these choices.^{109b}

In short, blaming God for the unnecessary unpleasanties in our lives is like blaming the mirror for our reflection. Perspective (which is a function of choice) defines our reality from the platter of possibilities, but it also determines what is on the platter in the first place. Metaphorically speaking, our perspective determines:

- ❑ The selection of food that is on the menu. (Everything God does is for our good, so what is offered depends on what is good for us; and that depends on our ability to receive the good. The wider our perspective, the more God we see—receptive capacity expands—and the greater the field of possibilities.)
- ❑ Which of those foods we are actually served. (Perspective defines reality from the range of options.)
- ❑ How much pleasure we receive from what we eat. (As noted elsewhere, the qualitative experience of the circumstance is also based on our perspective.)

Since human consciousness is required to “collapse the wave probability” (see Chapter 18, “A Quantum State”), those who are completely unaware or spiritually unconscious, have to eat whatever is in front of them. They have no say in spiritual matters. Their world is entirely physically-based: cause and effect. However we define nature, this is it.

DRAWING ON PERFECTION

Perhaps the real difficulty in understanding the natural world

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109b. “The main responsibility to complete God’s plan lies in man’s hands” (*Chagigah* 13b).

lies not in our definition of *chance* but in our underestimating the sophistication of *chance*. In Kabbalah, *Tohu* (“randomness” or “chaos”) originates at the level of the inscrutable *Sefirah* of *Keser*, which is above both nature and intellect.

It is highly relevant to note that human beings are incapable of independently duplicating true randomness, and a valid random number generator, for example, is impossible to create. We can only produce a stream of numbers that appear as if they were chosen randomly, unless the algorithm is based on an atomic or subatomic physical phenomenon which obey the laws of quantum mechanics. It is obvious that our inability to fathom total perfection is matched only by our inability to fathom total imperfection. God is perfect, and everything He does is perfect. In absolute reality, there is no concept of *chance* as we understand it. But if a finite world can exist within the Infinite, if multiplicity can exist within unity, and if free will can coexist with Divine foreknowledge, then we will have to accept that disorder can exist within Divine order.

Still, the underlying flaw in our fixation is that everyone and everything must be in the “right” place and nothing can be “out of place” for perfection to be realized. Naturally, this would preclude the possibility of two or more legitimate outcomes or even routes—be it the position or path of a leaf or of a human being.

The presumption is that a given physical permutation will have an exacting spiritual outcome. This is not so. Fundamentally, *mitzvos* (which lead to perfection of oneself and the world) will have fluctuating spiritual impact based on one’s awareness, intent, and effort. Whereas a poorly executed *mitzvah* carried out with extreme effort may generate greater spiritual perfection—and fixing of the world—than a *mitzvah* performed with technical precision and minimal effort; in fact, lacking proper intent (such as in the case of *Megillah* or blowing of the *shofar*) a *mitzvah* may be totally invalid.

The natural world awaits our contribution to move creation forward, but our awareness does more than infuse spirituality into physicality. We, as noted, give birth to a more perfect physical

reality that is most profoundly, non-linear. The concept of *teshuvah* serves as a potent proof, whereby our heightened awareness (which shifts perspective) retroactively creates order out of disorder—sublimely so, a *mitzvah* can emerge from sin and make imperfection the very instrument of perfection.

This is indeed the splendor of *teshuvah*, because in the *Next World* we experience only the final, more perfect reality. Symbolically speaking, let us say that a particular sin produces a straight line. This line is unchanging, since *teshuvah* does not alter what is but changes the meaning of what is. The straight line can become part of a triangle, a square, a hexagon, or any other shape, for better or worse—though in the case of *teshuvah* the line becomes part of a pattern that perfects our soul.

We see how our preoccupation with a perfect temporal physicality is misplaced. The shape of what transpires is no longer meaningful if it no longer exists. A line may still be a line, but once it becomes part of another form, it loses its definition, its meaning. This is how a sin becomes a *mitzvah*. Ultimately, we dwell in a non-physical world where there is no time. We do not live with a “line of sin,” but, rather, we exist as the complete defining shape, in totality, for eternity. Hence the previously-quoted Talmudic proclamation “There are those who acquire their World (to Come) only after years (of Divine Service) and there are those who acquire their World (to Come) in an instant.”^{109c}

As noted in an earlier footnote, the first stage of creation is called the Universe of Chaos or *Tohu*, but Kabbalistic writings teach that there was also emptiness (*bohu*), which indicates that there were other vessels ready to receive the light—which is called the “Universe of *Tikkun*.” On a macro level the core paradox—the harmonization of disorder and order—can be modestly grasped when we recall that in order to bring creation to its state of perfection—*tikkun olam*—we need to emit our own individuality, fulfill our own *tikkun*. Imperfection, or disorder, is thus a requisite for

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109c. See *Avodah Zarah* 17a.

perfection, perfect order. As we are about to see, this concept becomes less confounding with a glimpse into how God's perfect will expresses itself, in the system that manifests His goodness.

THE GREATER GOOD AND JUSTICE FOR ALL

We have noted a multitude of reasons for why there are challenges in our lives—all geared toward our good. But what if a situation exists where none of these reasons are in play? (a) We will not get the message; (b) it has nothing to do with our *tikkun* or *mazal*; (c) we are not a *kli* in this instance; (d) it will not lead to greater injury; (e) an open miracle is unnecessary; (f) there is no domino effect into anyone's life; and (g) the situation does not impose on anyone's free will, *tikkun*, or *mazal*.

Might an all-loving God choose to intervene to spare us from an unnecessarily painful ordeal—even when we are negligent? What is the harm? To answer this question, imagine our world as a giant cosmic game, with one Referee. If at any time He gives one player a single extra point outside of the rules, what happens to the game? It's rendered illegitimate. We would not have a game at all. In that instant, there is no longer a difference between that single unearned point and all of the rightly earned ones. All points become worthless.

We know, of course, that God does intercede in the game of life. Often, His wisdom does not make sense to us. Yet God is Truth. His system (comprised of *hanhagas hamishpat* and *hanhagas hayichud*) is unimpeachable—infinately so. Our inability to grasp the rules of the game signifies a deficiency within ourselves, not in Truth.^{110a}

Recall that *hanhagas hamishpat*, the system of justice, runs according to the rules God sets. It falls under the canopy of cause

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110a. "The deeds of the Mighty One are perfect, for all His ways are just" (Deuteronomy 32:4).

and effect and is to varying degrees observable. *Hanhagas hay-ichud*, which also runs according to a perfect order, is employed to bring the world to a state of perfection. When God governs along this trajectory, however, rules seem to bend arbitrarily, but only because they are part of a complete system that is further away from human understanding.

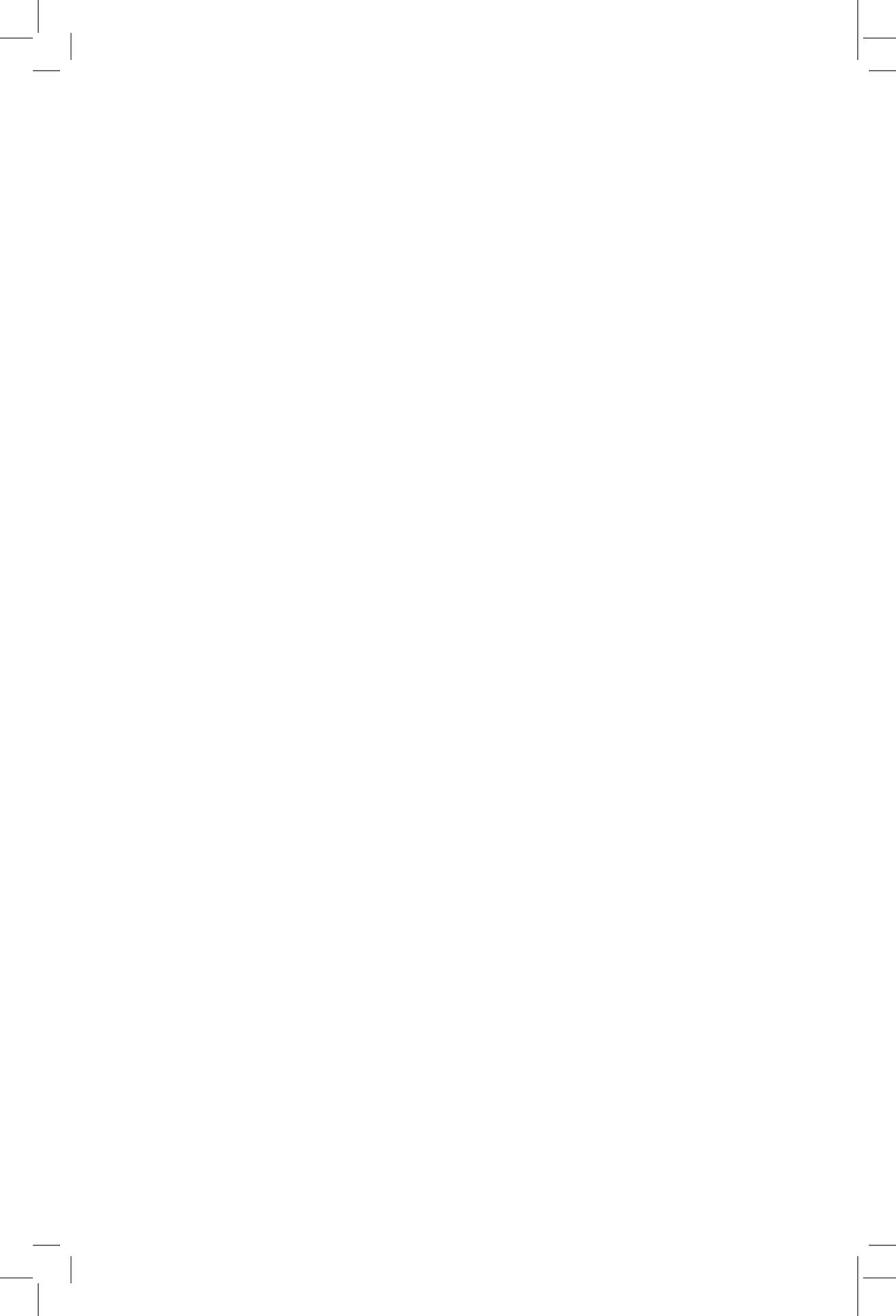
Broken laws do not exist. Should gravity fail even once, privately, and without harm to anyone or anything, no one would cry foul, but we would no longer have the laws of gravity. This is not about fairness. It's about reality.^{110b} Our world exists for us to earn our place in the next world. An unjust intervention to do "good" voids an entire system built on reward and punishment, because, as we noted elsewhere, the greatest good that God could bestow on us is that we should be like Him. This requires that we assume ownership over our status—who we create ourselves into.

We cannot discharge our *tikkun* and be brought closer to Truth, by breaching a system that is designed by, and defined by, Truth. Justice is not vengeance. It is an essential ingredient of *chesed*.¹¹¹ No matter how low a person sinks, he is always better off operating within a system that maintains the larger good—the unadulterated function of free will—so that in the next world, his soul can enjoy the benefits it has justly earned in this world, through its various incarnations.

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110b. Gravity is offered as a metaphor, not as an example. God created the laws of physics, and as such He is not bound by them. In fact, we know that He has performed miracles that suspend the natural order. Truth, however, is His essence and His essence is nonchanging.

111. *Gevurah*—the guiding force of justice—yields to mercy, via *chesed*, once the situation and every possible ramification is filtered through the Infinite lens of truth. This is because *chesed* is not truly *chesed* if a short-term gain comes at the expense of our long-term good; and it explains why "an abundance of truth" is considered one of the attributes of mercy (Exodus 34:6–7).



We have learned that if reality is ignored, the purpose for specific experiences is rendered inert. There is an exception: the previously noted *tikkun*. In such instances, our soul needs to go through a transformative experience in order to grow, and neither awareness nor understanding is necessary.

Under parallel circumstances, a *middah* may be necessary for our growth. For example, a wealthy person who has become haughty may need to suffer a great financial loss, even abject poverty. Even if this person never once ponders the reason for his misfortune, it does not mean that the trait of haughtiness has not lessened. He may become angry at the world and envious of others and lust after the good old days—but haughty? Less so. Therefore, awareness itself is not the benchmark of whether or not something has a purpose—growth is. Without growth—voluntary or otherwise—the opportunity becomes meaningless.

That is indeed *mazal's* charter—to protect and promote our *tikkun*, the reason we are in this world in the first place. We now observe that not all *mazal* is created equal. Kabbalists describe two layers of *mazal*: *mazal elyon* (“upper *mazal*” or “hard *mazal*”) which corresponds to our mission in life, and *mazal tachton* (“lower *mazal*” or “soft *mazal*”) which corresponds to the conditions in our lives and our experience of those conditions. *Mazal elyon* is much

more difficult to alter because it is bound to our *tikkun*, while *mazal tachton* relates to the ease or difficulty that we encounter while fulfilling our destiny.

LIMITS TO MAZAL

Hard *mazal* is like the skeleton of the body. It provides the overall structure and frame for our lives. Like physical bone, it does not break under normal circumstances. Soft *mazal* is our spiritual skin; similar to its physical counterpart, it can become bruised by the natural elements.¹¹² What is the practical difference? Hard *mazal* safeguards certain critical experiences where growth can be realized without awareness, while soft *mazal* serves to facilitate growth opportunities that require effort and understanding (as such, altering our perspective and shaping the quality of those experiences).

The flow of soft *mazal* is more easily interrupted because the capacity to receive the spiritual cargo is only hardwired into hard *mazal*. Soft *mazal* requires our participation—there is no other way. For instance, a person who wishes to become stronger can be given weights and taught the proper exercises, but lifting the weights for him does not help; there is no growth, so there is no point.

Hard *mazal* is more durable but can be forfeited as well, because God set spiritual and physical laws into motion that are used by all of creation, and just as He does not suspend gravity to accommodate one's desire to fly, He does not suspend reality as we choose to ignore it. Because *mazal* is integrated into the natural order, should a person move too far away from truth—in relation to his *madraigah*—then *mazal* simply ceases to operate in his world.¹¹³

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112. *Chazal* observe that matters of life expectancy/health, children, and livelihood are not contingent on one's merit, but on one's *mazal* (*Moed Katan* 28a). Even though they are correctly identified as hard *mazal*, they are not necessarily immutable.

113. We walk straight into a question, which the principle of *Shomer Psayim Hashem* (“God protects the simple”) answers. Because *hashgachah pratit* requires

Furthermore, the reason that we are granted a “Plan B” (to be used as a *kli*) is to make free will visible, and its integrity is undermined if *mazal* operates with obvious indifference to our behavior.

Imagine, for instance, a person whose *mazal* dictates great wealth, but he chooses to spend his time with trivial pursuits. As fate would have it, he is left an inheritance of one million dollars, which he promptly gambles at the racetrack. His *mazal* holds firm, and he wins. However, then he bets it all again, and again, and again. At some point, his *mazal* will run out. It needs to. Otherwise, he would reveal God’s Presence—through a parade of open miracles—when he only merits to conceal His Presence.

This brings us to the following distinction: Hard *mazal* that keeps an undesirable decree in place cannot be broken by a person moving away from reality. For example, a preordained long life can be interrupted by reckless behavior, but a short life cannot be extended by such behavior. As we noted: “The fear of God prolongs one’s days, but the years of the wicked shall be shortened.”¹¹⁴

The reason is not punitive. Growth opportunities for a person whose life has so drastically deviated from his purpose are limited.

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a bond that is based on an earned status, what happens to those who are not able to achieve this growth through no fault of their own? We learn (Psalms 116) that God protects the simple (the young or those of low IQ, who will always be like children). Therefore, those whose intellectual capabilities are limited or, in the case of children, whose *da’as* has not ripened, are protected from harm, even though they live in the natural world. This protection, however, extends only to ordinary behaviors and not to deliberate and flagrant recklessness. In addition, there is much discussion and dispute regarding for whom, how, and when this protection can be relied on.

We can further explain the welfare of these individuals in the following way: The Talmud states, “The righteous ones are judged to a hair’s breadth” (*Yevamos* 121b). This means that God holds those of greater knowledge and perfection to a higher standard. The bond between man and God is not based on an objective standard, but rather on one’s own capacity. Therefore, on their own level, “the simple” may have a stronger bond in contrast to those who tap into a smaller percentage of their greater potential.

114. Proverbs 10:27.

Recall that the faculty to receive what hard *mazal* ensures is already inherent in our souls; therefore, God allows hard *mazal* to be preserved so that the soul can receive its *tikkun*. However, given the decision-making history of such an individual, hard *mazal* that facilitates good fortune is likely to be misused or abused, which would only serve to further distance this person from God—in this world and in the World to Come. Comparing *mazal* to a coat of armor is tempting but misleading; not because *mazal* does not protect us, but because its allegiance is to the real us—the soul.

Alas, we cannot completely oversimplify God’s administration. The concept of *tzora’as habais* (“a type of spiritual fungus on the home”) offers an illustration of how an irrevocable positive decree can materialize. The *Midrash* relates that the Canaanites hid their valuables in the walls of their homes before the Israelites conquered the Land, and that God would send a *nega* (“affliction”) upon the home, which required the new Israelite owner to destroy the wall or even the entire house in order to eradicate it. In the process, he would find the hidden treasure. It was decreed long ago to give this man wealth, and God could have granted it to him in any number of ways. Why did this person have to suffer the destruction of his house to receive what was destined for him anyway? He did not. Our Sages tell us that *tzora’as* appears as a punishment for several sins, stemming from poor *middos*.¹¹⁵ His wealth came to him in this way due to his own poor choices. Otherwise, he would have been granted his fortune in a pleasant way.

It would be wise to consider that we do not always know good fortune from bad. In the words of the Ramchal: “Great wealth in this world serves one of three purposes: either as a blessing granted by the Creator ... or as a trial and test; or as a punishment and stumbling block.”¹¹⁶ Included in the “punishment” category is what we have discussed: Good fortune in this

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115. *Arachin* 15a, 16b.

116. *Mesillas Yesharim*, (*The Path of the Just*), Ch. 4.

world may constitute partial payment—for efforts and challenges that fail to refine the soul—and payment in full, for those who have no place in *Olam Haba*.

DESTINY OFF COURSE

Should a person sink below his *madraigah*, then his *mazal* is weakened or altogether shattered and no longer offers blanket protection against unnecessary challenges. While *mazal* exists to expedite needed growth for the soul, a person who is negligent is thus left unprotected—from others as well as from himself—and is subject to the aforementioned cuts.

Via *mazal*, God gives us exactly what we need to operate within our *madraigah*. Falling below our *madraigah* is the very definition of negligence because it means that we have proactively strayed from our purpose. As a person is cast lower and lower into nature, he encounters greater challenges and occasions to be harmed. As his *mazal* skin is ripped away and his spiritual bones become frailer and fracture, increasingly greater vigilance will be required to keep him emotionally, spiritually, and physically safe.¹¹⁷

Regarding our purpose in life, the Ramchal explains that God does not give us anything that we cannot handle.¹¹⁸ Yet people commit suicide every day, which obviously renders the ordeal not only useless but destructive. Certainly, it is an indication that they were given more than they could handle, is it not?

The answer is that the above statement is true when we speak of *hanhaga hayichud* (“a person’s role in creation”) under strict *hashgachah pratis* (or under *mazal*, according to some definitions/

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117. “Those who are far from Him are prone to incidents, and have no one to protect them from harm; as one who walks in the dark is likely to fall unless he is careful to walk slowly.” Ramban, on “He will not remove His eyes from a righteous man” (Job 36:7).

118. Ramchal, *Da’as Tevunos*, 170. See also *Avodah Zarah* 3a; and *Shemos Rabbah* 34.

opinions). Once a person deviates from his path and moves into *hashgachah klalis* (“general supervision”), then he is afforded no such guarantee or protection.¹¹⁹ God does not test us in something that we cannot withstand, but self-inflicted wounds have nothing to do with being tested (unless they fall outside the scope of our *bechirah*.) Our Sages state, “[I]f someone wishes to kill himself by [jumping into] fire or a river, he can, even though there is no such decree [that he should die].”¹²⁰

IMPOSSIBLE ASSUMPTIONS

In total and complete arrogance, Pharaoh lost his free will. God said, “I will harden Pharaoh’s heart, and I will increase My [miraculous] signs and wonders in the land of Egypt.”¹²¹ One might assume that being reduced to a full-blown *kli* would leave Pharaoh swaying in the precarious winds, yet even in the midst of the tenth plague—the death of the firstborn, of which he was one—God intervened to spare him. Such was his place in God’s design.

Due to the hidden influences of providence, it should be understood that in any given situation, we are unable to identify “Person A” and “Person B.” Just because Person A may injure Person B, we cannot assume that Person A is on a higher spiritual level. We are incapable of gauging what is in the overall best interest for each *neshamah* and the corresponding role each person is to play in God’s master plan. Indeed, they may both have been caught in the net of a *kli* to advance the will of yet another person’s agenda.

We can never say that a person who is injured or killed by a seemingly random event is a *kli* or has abdicated his role or responsibility, for many great people have met with tragic, untimely

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119. The ways of *teshuvah* are always open and have the power to instantly realign us with our true path.

120. Tosafos, *Bava Basra* 144b.

121. Exodus 7:3.

deaths. We can more confidently ascribe these instances to a *tikkun* or *kaparah* (“atonement”) for the generation. A shared fate does not mean a shared spiritual level. We must never presume otherwise.

CAUTION TO THE RIGHTEOUS AND TO ALL

When a person rises above his nature, there are gradations of providence that become activated, based on his awareness of God. The apex of this relationship allows for enhanced abilities to succeed in his endeavors, protection from those who might thwart his efforts, and active intervention in a place of danger. Because a *tzaddik* lives above his nature, God does not allow the physical world—people, places, and things—to ensnare him.¹²²

The righteous are protected because the world exists for them—they are bringing God into the world and are provided with the means to ensure their success. Yet attachment to God is not a stable system at fixed levels, and should a righteous person’s thoughts wander, such unreserved providence is temporarily suspended. The Rambam writes that this superseding level of providence is reserved for only when one’s current conduct merits it.

Providence is removed from him when he is involved in other matters... [And] when one averts his attention from God, he is separated from God and God is therefore separated from him; then [this person] is exposed to any evil that might befall him.¹²³

He then exists in the natural world without active Divine

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122. It is frequently and wrongly assumed that Divine providence extends exclusively to one’s physical safety. On the contrary, the spiritual mission of the *tzaddik* is the actual priority and his physical well-being may be preserved or sacrificed in order to aid him in his endeavors.

123. Rambam, *Moreh Nevuchim* (The Guide for the Perplexed) 3:51. “[T]he intensity of the calamity is commensurate with the length of time of the forgetfulness, and the baseness of the matter which he occupies himself” (ibid.).

providence but not necessarily without the protection of *mazal*. As we explained, at what point God intervenes in the natural order is subject to dispute. Some opinions hold that the natural order is disrupted only for *tzaddikim*, and the protection of *mazal* is under the guise of nature, while others endorse a view where God actively intervenes in the natural order to maintain and preserve the flow of *mazal*. The end result to us is the same: we get what we have coming to us.

For those who live within the boundaries of their *madraigah*, this level of Divine providence (beyond the assurance of *mazal*) does not operate, and these people may not be saved from peril or aided in their efforts—through Divine intervention in the natural world.

This explains why the Talmud states, “It is prohibited for a man to walk under a dilapidated wall.”¹²⁴ No one is immune. At times, even the righteous can find their special providence suspended;¹²⁵ those who live within their *madraigah* may not be afforded protection to begin with; and those who sink below their given *madraigah* are without active Divine providence, and the strength of *mazal* is diminished or altogether lost, leaving them without any nonphysical protection.¹²⁶ Finally, as a general rule, *mazal* does not govern every aspect of our lives or enter into every situation. Even with our *mazal* fully intact, we are susceptible to mishaps that will not interfere with our life’s purpose.

In light of these insights, it would be foolish to assume that we can easily identify what level of providence we are guided by. Not only are there degrees of providence, as well as fluctuations within these points based on our current conduct, but we can never be

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124. *Ta’anis* 20b.

125. The Gemara in *Shabbos* (32a) gives us another reason. The miracles which are performed for us are deducted from our accumulated merits in the World to Come.

126. *Mazal* for the Jewish people as a whole is weaker during the Jewish month of *Av* (*Ta’anis* 29b).

certain of our overall *madraigah*. The Rambam discusses the evaluation of iniquities and merits and concludes:

This valuation takes into account not the number, but the magnitude [qualitatively speaking] of merits and iniquities. There may be a single merit that outweighs many iniquities ... and there may be one iniquity that offsets many merits...¹²⁷ The whole world operates on this principle... . This measuring system does not work on a one-for-one basis... . Only God knows how to evaluate sins and merits in this respect.¹²⁸

A NATURAL BORN SUCCESS

When a person loses his protection, it does not mean that the world collapses in on him. Rather, he does not maximize the opportunities for his soul's growth. For this reason, a person can sidestep *mazal* points, even when they are inherently challenging. For example, one can miss marrying his *bashert* ("destined spouse"), who, as it turns out, would have been difficult to live with but nonetheless necessary for his growth and integral to his spiritual mission—to say nothing of the children who were to come through this union. In a narrow sense, we might think that he was lucky, but the reality is quite different.

As noted earlier, God has many messengers to carry out His will, but when a person falls below his *madraigah*, no such messenger may come along because *mazal* is no longer operating at full capacity. By defaulting on his obligations, he pursues a different path and meets with "success" —not because *mazal* dictates, but because of his efforts in the natural world. Becoming a *kli* does not mean that we default to victim mode. Central to the workings of free will is that even when a person abdicates all personal

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127. Rambam, *Hilchos Teshuvah* 2:2.

128. *Ibid.*, 3:1.

responsibility, he may be, by all accounts, victorious in specific areas, but such prosperity is in appearance only.^{129a}

Recall the emotional laws of free will: A person who lives irresponsibly moves away from his purpose and potential and will de facto suffer from a range of emotional issues that will render him unable to enjoy what he has (whether achieved through natural efforts or granted through unalterable decrees). A Heavenly blessing of long life to the depressed person becomes a self-imposed curse. The same is true for riches that are used to indulge in self-destructive vices or the loving family of one embroiled in self-promoted strife.

Being unable to appreciate the good is one thing, but, as we learned in an earlier chapter, such a person cannot easily endure any difficulties. Without perspective, his coping mechanism is disabled and it just feels as if the universe is relentless, heaping upon him trouble after trouble.^{129b}

Compounding the consequences is that he is disposed to taking improper actions toward others and becoming a negative influence, causing them to sin, thus spreading viral-like consequences for which he is ultimately accountable.

Although our given *mazal* would not have permitted us to be used as a *kli* to cause damage or death to another, should we descend into absolute nature, not only are we not protected from others, but others may not be protected from us. We can cause injury to others regardless of how such an accident will affect our fate—because we have abandoned it. God may also position us as an ill-fated messenger (again, for our ultimate, though pitiful, good), forever altering our life, while ensuring the destiny of another.

Naturally, this is a two-sided proposition. To the extent that

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129a. See Job 15:20–35. See Chapter 14, “Agents of Adversity” for an explanation as to why he may achieve success in this world.

129b. “The [wicked] constantly fear that calamity will come upon them and are in a constant state of fear and heartache” (Ralbag on Job 11:20).

we are fulfilling our spiritual task, our lives are richly fulfilling and pleasurable. Our enhanced perspective further allows us to appreciate the good and to put the challenges into their proper context. As we rise above our nature, all of life's experiences become tailor-made for our good and direct growth—*direct* being the key word. As we move still higher, we are supervised with Divine providence and protected from unnecessary incidents and accidents—*unnecessary* being the key word. We live in a more beautiful world, objectively and subjectively, with the most treasured incentive yet to come, awaiting us in *Olam Haba*.

Metaphorically speaking, consider *mazal* to be a paved road, rather than a dirt road or no road at all. Although *mazal* makes it easier for us to get to our destination, a person can still choose to drive in the opposite direction. Even so, when all is said and done, the road of life is difficult—paved or not—and it's supposed to be, because there is no reward for a *mitzvah* in this world.¹³⁰ "Today is to perform; tomorrow is for reward."¹³¹

Rashi explains that in this world, the fruit (reward) and the tree (*mitzvah*) are separate, and so *mitzvos* have no taste (relatively speaking, no comparison to the eternal pleasures) in this world.¹³² While consequences are not intrinsic to the *mitzvah*, it should now be obvious that there is certainly cause and effect. Rabbi Avigdor Miller reminds us, "We have a right to hope for [pleasure] even in this world... . People who follow the dictates of the Torah are the ones who are happiest even in this world."¹³³

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130. *Kiddushin* 39.

131. *Eruvin* 22a, *Avodah Zarah* 50a.

132. See Rashi on Genesis 2:25.

133. Rabbi Avigdor Miller, *On Emunah and Bitachon* (Judaica Press, 2012).



PART 7

FACETS
OF CHOICE

Although it is true that not all choices are created equal, the intention and expression of each choice also determine the full impact on our lives. Here we examine, through our finite lens, how God factors in the motivation behind our behavior, and how the decisions we make affect our lives and our world in ways we might never have expected.



A sin of any type damages our *neshamah*. However, if a person intends to act irresponsibly but does not follow through, he is not punished for the sin he thought to commit.¹ The Nefesh HaChaim writes,

When it comes to sinning, the spirit of *tumah* [impurity] encircles the sinner only when he actually commits the sin, as opposed to when he does a *mitzvah*; the beneficial impact is made on the higher worlds the moment he intends on doing the *mitzvah*.²

There are limitations to this rule, for God disregards immoral intentions only if they remain completely in the realm of thought.³ If any concrete steps are taken to actualize our intent, then we must seek forgiveness and atonement. Furthermore, if the sinner is a repeat offender (of the actual deed), then his future negative

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1. *Kiddushin* 40a. The Gemara (*Yoma* 29a) explains that certain sinful thoughts are, in fact, considered even worse than actual sins.
2. Rabbi Chaim Volozhin, *Nefesh HaChaim*, 50–51.
3. The Rambam (*Hilchos Teshuvah*) discusses the complexities of sins that are entirely thought-based, such as: “Do not hate your brother in your heart” (Leviticus 19:17).

intentions will be counted as if he did them, even if he was unsuccessful in carrying them out this time. (Still, in such a case, the negative impact on his soul is not as severe as if he had actually carried out the sin.)

One exception where one's thoughts are as damaging as the behavior—regardless of whether or not he is a repeat offender—is the sin of *avodah zarah* (“idol worship”). Even the thought itself is a grave sin and carries with it its own consequences.⁴

THE RANKING

While we cannot say that one *mitzvah* is more vital to creation than another, God does give us a general hierarchy of commandments. As a rule, for example, transgressing a negative commandment is more severe than not fulfilling a positive commandment, and the sins of idolatry, adultery, and murder are indisputably more serious than other transgressions.⁵ While there are innumerable nuances, exceptions, and combinations of motivation, the top three are presented to give the reader a sense of significance. We begin with the most damaging.

- ❑ One who leads others to sin. The gravest offense is when a person persuades others to engage in immoral activity. “Whoever leads the masses astray will not be able to repent for all the wrong he commits.”⁶ The iniquity

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4. The sin of *avodah zarah* consists of two parts: the act itself and the thoughts and satisfaction surrounding it. Each part of the sin is evaluated separately, and consequences are meted out separately (*Kiddushin* 40a). See *Tanya*, Ch. 1, for another important exception to this rule.

5. *Erchin* 15b. According to Jewish law, these sins are so serious that they are forbidden under any circumstances. The Sages also extrapolate a teaching that is too often overlooked—a fourth sin equal to these three combined: *lashon hara* (“slander”—lit., “evil tongue”).

6. *Ethics of the Fathers* 5:18. The Rambam explains this to mean that it is more difficult, but not impossible, to repent. Elsewhere, we learn that one who

that they commit through him is not erased, even if he himself repents.

- ❑ *Mumar l'hachis* (“a violator out of spite”).⁷ One who rejects a *mitzvah* out of arrogance, in order to anger God. Such a person transgresses openly and recklessly, without regard for collateral damage.
- ❑ *Mumar l'tayavon* (“one who rebels out of desire”).⁸ Such a person does not vigorously reject God’s commandments but gives himself over to temptation, due to his inability to overcome his lusts or ego-leaning aspirations. This person wants to do what is proper, but he is unable to rise above his nature.

As we move all the way down the ladder of reckoning, we find that among the less severe is one who does wrong without knowing that it is wrong. This person is a *tinok she'nishbah* (“a captured child”), a term that refers to a person who sins inadvertently as a result of having been raised without the necessary knowledge of proper conduct and one’s Torah obligations.⁹ Finally, and lowest on the scale of culpability, is an action through happenstance. When required, God makes us agents of negativity and we become the cause to bring about harm.¹⁰

ON THE PLUS SIDE

Our Sages teach us, “Greater is one who does something that

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causes the punishment of another is not accepted within the “inner circle” of God (lit., “cannot come close to”). See *Shabbos* 149b.

7. See *Avodah Zarah* 26b.

8. Ibid.

9. See *Shabbos* 68b.

10. Ibid., 32a. It cannot be assumed that this person is an instrument for negativity as a result of bad decisions and is thus used as a *kli*. The cause may

he is commanded to do than one who does what he is not commanded to do.”¹¹ A distinction, then, is drawn between doing what may be deemed proper, even pious, and an actual commandment or *mitzvah*. The former is praiseworthy, but we are not transgressing a commandment by failing to act.¹²

The very fact that a behavior is commanded by God makes it more vital to the relationship. With casual thought, we might assume that one who does something outside of what is required receives greater reward. This is not so. Any type of relationship will be healthier when we do what is asked of us rather than give only as we desire.¹³ In regard to the spiritual plane, the Maharal writes,

The fact that God commanded a certain *mitzvah* shows that it is part of His Divine order and one who is commanded and performs it enters God’s realm. Conversely, if God did not

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be any one, or a combination, of the nine discussed reasons for life’s challenges, or because God in His Infinite wisdom has chosen this person to be a *shaliach* (“emissary” or “messenger of God”) for reasons that we cannot begin to fathom.

11. *Kiddushin* 31a. Tosafos explains this is so, because the ego desires to assert its independence, and complying with the will of God over our own will requires more effort. The name given to this is *reactance theory*, which is responsible for more stubborn thinking than anything else. It is so powerful that a person may do the opposite of what is asked of him if he feels that his freedom is being restricted. Astonishingly, this is true even if he actually *prefers* to do what is requested of him. See F. Rhodewalt and J. Davison, Jr., “Reactance and the Coronary-Prone Behavior Pattern: The Role of Self-Attribution in Response to Reduced Behavioral Freedom,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 44, (1983).

12. The Torah tells us that a person who desires to carry out his good deed but could not accomplish his objective still gets credit as if he had actually completed it (*Berachos* 6a). The Maharal, however, understands this to mean that we do not get all of the credit as if we had actually engaged in the behavior (*Shabbos* 63a, *Chiddushei Aggados Shabbos* 39).

13. “If someone is fulfilling all he must do and then goes beyond his obligations out of love, he is on a very high level and will be rewarded plentifully for his love and dedication” (*Mesillas Yesharim*, Ch. 18).

obligate an individual in a *mitzvah*, this shows that it is not part of the Divine order for that particular individual and doing that *mitzvah* will not uplift the person as much.¹⁴

THE MOTIVATION

One whose *mitzvos* are tainted with an ulterior motive does not capitalize on the opportunity for growth, nor does he elevate the world in the highest sense. On this, the Ramchal writes, “It is clear from their [the Sages] words that there are various kinds of “not for the sake of the *mitzvah* itself,” the worst being the type in which one serves not for the purpose of Divine service at all, but in order to deceive people or to gain honor or wealth.”¹⁵

Nonetheless, when we are the willful agents for good, we will be rewarded in kind.¹⁶ Higher levels, of course, exist, and here too, gradations abound within two main categories: love and fear.¹⁷

One who does as he is commanded out of fear of God (and to gain reward and avoid negative consequences) is involved in Torah *lo lishma* (“not for the sake of Heaven”). The Talmud says what is known: “Greater is the one who acts out of love than one who acts out of fear.” The Rambam writes,

A person should not say, “I will fulfill the *mitzvos* of the Torah, engrossing myself in its wisdom, to receive its blessings, thus meriting life in the World to Come.” Nor should he say, “I will distance myself from all the sins the Torah

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

15. *Mesillas Yesharim*, Ch. 16.

16. Rambam, *Hilchos Teshuvah*, Ch. 10.

17. The Gemara tells us that a person should perform *mitzvos* even for alternative reasons (*Pesachim* 7a). The expectation is that one will come to do what is right with pure motivation. The Rambam (*Hilchos Teshuvah*, 90) states that one should always engage in Torah, even *lo lishma* (“with ulterior motivation”), for out of *lo lishma* stems *lishma* (“for its own sake”).

cautions against, to be spared the curses listed in the Torah, so that my soul shall not be cut off from life in the World to Come.”¹⁸

To perform God’s will out of love is greater than to do it out of fear; to repent out of love is greater than to do so out of fear. It is important to note that even fear-based motivation is on a high level, because at least the position is rooted in reality: there is a Creator Who has set up a system of rewards and consequences.

FOR HEAVEN’S SAKE

Our Sages write, “Be as careful with a light *mitzvah* as you are with a serious one. For you do not know the reward for the *mitzvos* ...”¹⁹ In fact, the Torah barely discusses the reward that a person receives for each *mitzvah*, because even the smallest level of reward in *Olam Haba* is unimaginable to us.²⁰ “One moment of pleasure in *Olam Haba* is greater than all the pleasure of *Olam Hazeih*.”²¹ It is therefore utterly impossible to communicate the qualitative nature of reward in the World to Come.

Knowing the reward of a *mitzvah* would also create a psychological hurdle that could stall our intrinsic motivation.²² When

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18. Rambam, *Hilchos Teshuvah* 10:1.

19. Ethics of the Fathers 2:1.

20. Moreover, the intrinsic difficulty of a *mitzvah* is not the sole determinant of one’s reward. “Someone whose nature is flawed, yet in spite of this constantly strives to overcome his evil inclination and to improve his ways, is rewarded by God according to the difficulty of the struggle” (Vilna Gaon, *Even Shleimah* 1:8).

21. Ethics of the Fathers 4:17.

22. Extrinsic rewards are often de-motivating. In one experiment, people who were paid \$100 to perform a task rated it more difficult and stressful than did those being paid \$25 to perform the same task under identical conditions, and as the size of the reward increases, one’s desire and interest decline. See J. L. Freedman and S. C. Fraser, “Compliance without Pressure: The Foot-in-the-Door Technique,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 4, no. 2 (1966): 195–202.

clear compensation is introduced into the equation, we subconsciously disconnect from the innate satisfaction of the action, and our inner drive weakens. In the classic *Tom Sawyer*, the perennial observer of human behavior Mark Twain opines,

There are wealthy gentlemen in England who drive four-horse passenger-coaches twenty or thirty miles on a daily line, in the summer, because the privilege costs them considerable money; but if they were offered wages for the service, that would turn it into work and then they would resign.

Nevertheless, there is a more profound reason God does not reveal our true reward: to allow us to act *l'sheim Shamayim* (“for the sake of Heaven”). For how can we expect to do a *mitzvah* out of love for God, if we can too easily calculate what is to be gained?

This brings into our discussion the oft-misunderstood concept of *mesirus nefesh*—which does not mean that we begrudgingly fulfill our obligation. *Mesirus nefesh* is where self-sacrifice (willful suffering—lit., “surrendering one’s soul”) gives us joy because our actions are pleasing—give pleasure, as we understand it, to God.

Dwelling on the reward robs us of the opportunity to act purely *l'sheim Shamayim*—to eagerly give to God and not as a roundabout way to give to ourselves. We can only fully give of ourselves when we are focused on what we are giving and not on what we are receiving.

A similar dynamic exists in our everyday lives and relationships, where exerting ourselves to bring joy to a loved one gives us tremendous joy. We labor excitedly and enthusiastically—and so the giver becomes the receiver. This is evident from the verse “Jacob worked for seven years for Rachel, and they seemed to him as a few days, because of his love for her.”²³ It was precisely these

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23. Genesis 29:20.

intense feelings that morphed the pain of the wait into an entirely different experience.

When we give out of love, we feel pleasure from what we give away—and we receive because we are part of the undiluted whole.²⁴ *Echad* (“one”) and *ahavah* (“love”) have the same *gematria* (“numerical value”) of 13; love exists where we are able to shed our egos and connect with another and become one. Indeed, the root of *ahavah* is *hav*, which means “to give.”²⁵ Even when our work is difficult, it can be transformed. In the moment of complete sacrifice, our pain has a purpose. It takes on new meaning, and meaning, as we know, brings pleasure.²⁶

THE JOY OF GIVING

We can work tirelessly for someone we care about or for a cause we believe in and not feel the pain—on the contrary, we usually feel energized and invigorated. Similarly, to the degree that we love ourselves, we can invest in our long-term well-being (even beyond this world, toward *Olam Haba*) with maximum effort and enthusiasm.

To fulfill our obligations without joy quashes our spiritual vitality.²⁷ In much the same way that negative emotions—such as anxiety and anger—are tied into the ego, the more our behavior is

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24. In this way, we adopt the advice of the Sages to “love work” (See *Ethics of the Fathers* 1:10).

25. The *gematria* of *echad* and *ahavah* totals 26, which equals the *gematria* of the Tetragrammaton, God’s sacred name.

26. Expressing our appreciation to God for the opportunity to do His will invigorates our motivation. In the words of C. S. Lewis: “We delight to praise what we enjoy because the praise not merely expresses but completes the enjoyment; it is its appointed consummation.” (Clive Staples Lewis [1898–1963] known as C. S. Lewis, was a novelist, poet, and academic.)

27. Doing God’s will, even without joy, is still a necessary and worthy endeavor, and our obligations do not cease simply because we do not yet connect with the pleasure of the *mitzvah*.

an expression of our love, the more energy we have, because those actions are an extension, an expression, of our *neshamah*—and derive from a source of limitless energy. One who lacks positive emotion needs to continually muster willpower because he labors under the incessant burden of woeful self-sacrifice.²⁸

The Sages tell us, “The Divine Presence comes to rest upon a person only through his rejoicing in a *mitzvah*.”²⁹ When we coat our actions with a layer of *simchah* (“joy”), we strengthen our love and bond to God’s will. Rabbi Simcha Zissel Ziv writes,

A strong desire within a person generates power, enhances thought processes, helps overcome laziness and propels him in the path of wisdom. For this reason, the Torah warned against not being happy, because lack of happiness is lack of strong desire; they are one and the same. And anything that enhances desire enhances success.³⁰

In Chapter 11, “The Purpose of Free Will,” we explained that the more we give, the more Godlike we become. Our similarity heightens our awareness of God, which then increases our love for Him. Yet qualitatively, acts of *mesirus nefesh* are in an entirely different category of giving, because God Himself is the addressee of our love.

The highest use of free will is to surrender it—each time out of love—and to give it back to God, with love. The Talmud teaches an important principle: “Whether one does more or whether one does less [he fulfills his obligation] as long as his intentions are

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28. “Because you did not serve the Lord, your God, amid gladness and goodness of heart, when everything was abundant” (Deuteronomy 28:47). This passage refers to the terrifying Chapter of Rebuke (*Tochachah*) that befalls a person who served God but without “gladness and goodness of heart.”

29. *Shabbos* 30b.

30. Rabbi Simcha Zissel Ziv, *Chochmah U’Mussar*, Vol. 2, 224.

directed toward God.”³¹ When we are filled with the awareness that we are performing His will, and our actions are not predicated on, or prompted by, any other cause, we arrive at the deepest level of *chesed*—almost.

While the pleasure we feel from doing God’s will is not our motivation but a natural by-product, our giving is not complete, because it has a motivation. Namely, we desire to do His will. We noted earlier that: (1) *chesed* denotes an act of giving that has no prior cause; and (2) the act of creating oneself is the quintessential purpose of *chesed*. These two criteria do not appear to be met until we appreciate that giving—*mesirus nefesh*—ultimately melds into our character and then into our nature. At this point, we give without cause because it is our essence, an essence that we helped create. It is now that we have unearthed the deepest level of *chesed*.

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31. *Berachos* 5b and 17a.

We have learned that a genuine free will choice has wide-ranging ramifications and affects us in unimaginable ways—in this world and into the next. Yet precisely what constitutes a free will choice and how it differentiates itself from other types of choices has not been fully clarified, for one reason.

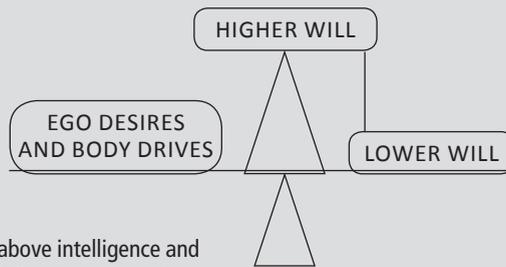
We will not know until the next world what was within the scope of our *madraigah*, what lay just beyond our reach, and what was to be forever out of reach. Consequently, we must move through this world as if all of our decisions are free will-based. In fact, to some extent, all of our decisions do affect our free will, even though the choices themselves are not within the zone of free will. We will detail how this works once we flesh out the dynamics thus far.

THE NUCLEUS OF FREE WILL

We have observed that a free will choice exists only where there is an objective truth—a moral component in the decision-making process. Therefore, even the ego and the body can battle it out without entering the free will arena. Take, for instance, the example of a person who wants to get up early to rob a bank but is too sleepy to get out of bed; he hits the snooze button and

goes back to sleep. Or our sleepy would-be thief can experience an intra-body conflict: as well as being sleepy, he is hungry. Does he opt to get out of bed for a snack or fall back to sleep? Even so, in the full absence of the soul's contribution to the equation, there is no basis to consider the process as a free will struggle, because there is no moral component—even though there are moral consequences to this course of action. Moreover, we cannot automatically assume that we are exercising free will, even when we stop to reflect on the virtue of our decision. There are times when our behavior is kept in check because we want to avoid the pangs of conscience. In effect, we have two competing desires. One is

To fully appreciate the inner workings of human will, we need to know that there are two levels of *ratzon* ("will"): upper and lower. The upper will is a reflection of our quintessential selves, a level of the soul that is above intelligence and supersedes logic. Our upper will directs our conscious and rational soul, where the lower will is found. For instance, we do an act of kindness for someone because of the following:



1. We don't want him upset with us. This decision comes from the ego.
2. To avoid feeling guilt. This decision comes from the lower will.
3. Because it is the right thing to do. This decision comes from the higher will.

At the level in reason 3, we are not motivated by the pleasure of the act. But as a result of our actions, we experience the inherent pleasure found in truth—doing what is right, which in this example is an act of kindness. Here, will and pleasure are one because will is united with truth, and connection to truth is the highest sublime pleasure. The lower will, by contrast, is drawn to truth because we desire pleasure or want to avoid pain. It is an "I"-based desire as opposed to a truth-based or core soul desire. Put another way, the higher will finds pleasure in what is right, while the lower will does what is right to find pleasure. The more refined the soul is, the more leverage we have over our lower will, and in turn, the more leverage our lower will has over the forces of the body and ego.

Ego-based pleasures are entirely counterfeit, like salt water to the thirsty soul. The body is not good or bad. Physicality can be elevated and infused with holiness and, as such, genuine pleasure. But abuse and indulgence, of course, lead ultimately to pain and suffering.

simply stronger than the other. The process is not dissimilar to an animal that decides to back away from its prey out of fear. Eating lunch and avoiding becoming lunch are opposing instincts—the animal merely chooses to stay alive.

What disqualifies the above as a free will choice is not necessarily our motive for doing what is right, but rather that one desire suppresses the other. As we explained, a free will choice exists when our awareness of the truth (via the soul) is in close balance with an opposing desire (ego or bodily-based)—giving us both the clarity and the capacity to act or not to act; and nothing other than our will tilts the equation.

This is not to say, however, that the decision is capricious, picked out of thin air. When we drill beneath the surface of free will, we find our essence, the root of the soul. Our deepest will emanates from this quintessential self.

Parenthetically, we recall from Chapter 16, “Reconfiguring Mazal—Part 1,” that the means to change our will is through prayer. A burning desire that surges forth from us to God redefines the true “I,” which then redirects our free will in a more perfect, God-aligned direction. Consequently, even if we do not care to pray, it behooves us to pray to care, because only the active use of our conscious will can shift the winds of free will.

We must also be aware of what is often misunderstood. While free will is rooted in our essence and regulated by our *madraigah*, a flash of perspective temporarily enhances our ability to see clearly and so it becomes easier, in that moment, to make a choice that would be otherwise beyond our grasp or *madraigah*.

For example, after witnessing a serious accident, what happens? We do not feel like joking. We are quiet. We feel almost detached, separated from the illusion of the world. Our ego is temporarily blinded, and we have the ability to take an emotional/spiritual leap forward.³²

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32. See Lieberman, *Real Power*.

Alas, the process works in reverse. In a burst of intense rage or despair, completely disconnected from reality, we can behave in a way that is far removed from what is good and true—and, as a result, fall fast and hard.

For this reason *bechirah* may be in effect even when opposing options hold disproportionate appeal. “Balance” does not mean that competing forces lie in fixed symmetry, poised on opposite sides of a proverbial razor thin line. The free will applecart is easily turned upside down—for better or worse—due to the force that we identify with in the moment—be it the body, ego, or soul. In this space, our *madraigah* momentarily oscillates, and as long as we are not overwhelmed by a competing desire, the choice can be legitimately labeled as free will.

A BATTLE WITHIN A BATTLE

Our *madraigah* is initially established by three main factors that are tethered to our *tikkun*: (a) the inherent refinement of the soul or how sensitized it is to truth, (b) the refinement of our emotional and cognitive faculties, and (c) our childhood environment and experiences, which shape our attitudes, beliefs, and values and orient our sense of right and wrong. These factors set the tone for our experiences *in* life, but they are largely irrelevant to our experience *of* life. As we learned, self-earned clarity via freedom of choice is the basis for life satisfaction.

Naturally, we are each on our own *madraigah*, so a choice for one person is not necessarily a choice for another. Using a spatial metaphor of a battlefield to portray a fluid process, Rabbi Dessler explains that the line shifts constantly. When two armies are locked in battle, fighting takes place only at the battlefield. Territory behind the lines of one army is under that army’s control. If one side gains a victory at the front and forces the enemy back, the position—our *madraigah*—on the battlefield will have

changed, and choices that had previously triggered an inner struggle—in the line of battle—have moved.³³

POSITIVE ASPECTS OF OUR NATURE	
ZONE C+	_____
ZONE B+	POSITIVE BEHAVIORS
ZONE A	_____ MADRAIGAH _____
ZONE B-	NEGATIVE BEHAVIORS
ZONE C-	_____
NEGATIVE ASPECTS OF OUR NATURE	

Beyond Zone C, the behavior is not even on our radar as a matter of right or wrong. It is who we are. For better or worse, we do not wrestle with “Should I or shouldn’t I?” At such times, we do not take pride because we have not injured an innocent person, nor are we consumed with guilt for not donating both of our kidneys to a complete stranger.

Regarding Zone C+, if we are completely drawn to what is right that we are not tempted to deviate from the truth, then free will is not actuated. As we noted in Chapter 6, this is, in essence, wisdom—a clarity of reality so acute that it penetrates our hearts and rouses our souls (moral clarity is really an extension of intellectual clarity because intellect is the “seat of the soul” and drives our awareness—and interest in the truth—in the first place).

For this reason, Rabbi Dessler explains that a person who lives his life in this zone could be doing many *mitzvos* and learning much Torah and still not be encountering *bechirah*, because his

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33. Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler, *Strive for Truth*, Vol. 1, 111–120.

conduct is only the result of his nature and nurture, without any self-generated growth.³⁴ Namely, he never conquered any aspect of his core self.

A behavior in Zone B does not qualify as a free will choice, but the soul is alert to the options and opportunities before us. By way of our conscience, our behavior affects our emotional and physical well-being—even though we are not necessarily responsible.³⁵

Regarding Zone B-, the question is: “How is it fair that we suffer for a choice that is not really a choice? It’s how God made me!” The logic is sound but incomplete. In this zone, the pain associated with the behavior is meant to spur us on, to nudge us forward, so that our attitude and behavior move closer to the battlefield, where free will *does* exist. All of life’s struggles are directed toward these epic battles.

While this may seem to be an extraordinary endeavor to bring a single decision over the free will threshold, the residual impact of one free will choice is life altering because it forks our entire reality into a new direction.

Via something akin to the *butterfly effect* (see Chapter 20, “The Nature of Chance”), even if we were never to make another free will choice, we are now moving in a completely different world. Our thought process includes variables that we helped bring into existence because of that single previous free will choice, and whenever these additional elements tip our future decisions into a

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34. Ibid., 111–116.

35. When good or bad is done through us—without any intent—it can still affect our emotional state. For example, a person who finds out that his car was stolen and then used to run down and kill an innocent person would feel awful. Why? It was not his doing, and yet, because it was his car that was used, he cannot help but feel somewhat responsible, even though intellectually he knows that he bears no blame. Conversely, if we were to learn that our car was parked in such a way that it prevented the injury or death of another, we would feel joyous, almost proud. It was “our” car, after all.

more responsible zone, we benefit in this world and are rewarded in the next.

Even when a person no longer struggles, and a positive behavior has become routine, there exists a qualitative component that does contain an element of free will. In Zone B+, we still choose the how—such as with proper intention and zeal. A layer of free will, then, still exists even when the behavior itself is no longer a question. The bandwidth of choice includes these micro-choices (“the how”), aspects that subtly affect our conduct, even though the larger behavior or macro-choice remains the same. Over time, the slightest changes can create the necessary momentum to integrate the behavior deeper into our personality.

Of course, the pleasure associated with the behavior encourages us to progress further into Zone B+ with the ultimate goal, to make what is right, natural: Zone C+. At which point we do good because that is who we are—like God.

PAYING INTEREST ON AN OLD DEBT

Rabbi Dessler explains that when a person has accustomed himself to a certain manner such that an improper behavior in question moves above his *madraigah*, he will be liable for every indulgence, even though it no longer presents itself to him as a live choice. This is because it was he himself who was the cause of his dulled sensibilities.³⁶ In contrast, when a positive behavior moves below our *madraigah*, we receive a reward every time we perform a correlated *mitzvah*, even if it is seemingly part of our identity—because our free will efforts helped make it a part of our being.

Analogously, one who deposits money in the bank earns interest, even though he is no longer working for the money. In a manner of speaking, the money is now working for him. An

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36. See Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler, *Strive for Truth*, Vol. 2, 57–58.

area where we fall short to the point of habituation is similar to one who borrows money and must repay interest on the debt, even though the original sum borrowed has been long spent. The interest accumulated does not go away.

We must explain, however, what we mean when we say that a behavior has been absorbed into our nature. Not only is our *madraigah* fluid and often in flux, even when it presents itself as fixed, but the underlying tension is also integral to the calculation. For instance, we cannot simply observe the bar at a “5” and declare that if one rises to a “6,” then he gets credit, and if one falls to a “4,” then he will be punished.

When a person swims against the tide—where both internal conflict (doubts and fears) and external forces (unforeseen circumstances and pressures) pull on his emotional resources, the ability to maintain his level (or even slip slightly) may be to his credit because the outward behavior does not reveal the true nature of the struggle. Where effort is required and energy expended to maintain the status quo, it cannot be said that we fully own the *middah*. It is not considered one’s nature unless it would be a tremendous struggle to oppose it.³⁷

UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES

The above explains the consequences of an ingrained behavior, but what is the spiritual liability that stems from a single previous poor choice? Without proper consideration, a person decides to move to a town that proves harmful to his spiritual growth. For

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37. Not only does our *madraigah* rise and fall, but our spiritual level should not be considered a straight horizontal line. It is more analogous to a line graph of a volatile stock. And, like a stock, there is a trend that shows our overall health, even though at each point—the highs and the lows—different *middos* are at different points. As a function of our *tikkun*, our struggles are not uniform. Moreover, a *middah* itself may not express itself evenly in all areas because some people and circumstances can be more trying than others.

how long will he bear responsibility? For example, if he asks a *shailah* (“a question of Torah law”) of the local Rav and is given an incorrect answer, is he held accountable to the same degree as if he had purposely disregarded this *halachah*? Or perhaps he walks into his local kosher restaurant, with the full desire and intent to eat kosher food, but unbeknownst to him, this establishment does not have a reliable *hechsher* (“kosher certification”).

The person’s intentions were pure, but each situation produced a precarious outcome that stemmed from the first choice—which was careless. The Ramchal explains, “God judges each individual deed according to its circumstances, whether it is accidental or purposeful, whether it is forced or willful.”³⁸

The spiritual harm of a sin committed without premeditation is not as great as one committed knowingly and with foreknowledge. Hence, we are not liable to the same degree as one who consciously, willingly disregards what is proper. However, a lack of knowledge does not necessarily shield us against the consequence. We can leave home without an umbrella because we chose not to take one or because the forecaster wrongly predicted a sunny day. Either way, we will get wet.

We must be abundantly clear. A person who does not have *bechirah* is not held accountable for making a poor choice—because it was not truly a choice.³⁹ However, all of our experiences—positive and negative, even those that we did not seek out or choose—still etch themselves into our soul. Such instances are not a consequence of choice but of *mazal/tikkun*.⁴⁰

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38. Ramchal, *The Way of God*, 115 (3:4).

39. “The great [Jewish] philosophers established *bechirah* as the cornerstone for the whole Torah ... from this resulted a common misperception among the masses; that all people actively choose their every act and every decision. This is a grievous error” (Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe, *Alei Shur*, Vol. 1, 156). Indeed, we learn that someone who does not have control over his actions is not responsible for them (*Bava Kamma* 28b).

40. This assumes no contributory negligence. One’s liability within a given

Questions of culpability aside, proper *teshuvah* is the only way to halt the rolling impact from a self-instilled negative behavior and from future choices that originated from a previous poor choice. It is an escape hatch from even the harshest of consequences at the level of willful intent.⁴¹ As noted, *teshuvah* is a process whereby we ask God to forgive us for our transgressions, and we resolve never to commit them again. It is a proactive actualization of free will that resets the bar and wipes clean the spiritual slate.

The Rambam writes, “One should see the world, and see himself as a scale with an equal balance of good and evil. When he does one good deed, the scale is tipped to the good—he and the world are saved. When he does one evil deed, the scale is tipped to the bad—he and the world are destroyed.”⁴² When we stop to consider the consequences that stem from the smallest of choices, it fast becomes clear that there are no small choices.

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situation is not easily discerned because the decision-making flowchart includes fluctuating junctures of awareness, effort, and intent. Therefore, even when we are a passive participant, the fact that God put us into a situation to serve as a conduit for negativity may necessitate us to do *teshuvah*.

41. Rambam (*Hilchos Teshuvah* 1:3) writes, “*Teshuvah* atones for all sins. Even a person who was wicked his whole life and repented in his final moments will not be reminded of any aspect of his wickedness.” Later, he qualifies that *teshuvah* is not effective for someone who willfully sins with the intention of doing *teshuvah* afterward.

42. *Hilchos Teshuvah* 3:4.

Our choices do not have closed-ended consequences but go to the core of our being, our eternity, and pervade all of creation—impacting on areas beyond our assumption and straining our finite sense of fairness. We have discussed at length how our choices define the entirety of our lives and our after-life. The following highlights five additional areas of impact; before we turn our attention to strategies for rising above our nature, we must know what is at stake.⁴³

FUTURE GENERATIONS

Adam was warned that should he disobey God’s single commandment not to eat from the Tree of Knowledge, he would die and introduce the concept of death to all future generations. If Adam had resisted the temptation, the *Sifra* states, “[All] future generations would not have known of death.” In the following

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43. If we are married, our actions influence our spouse, and our spouse’s actions influence us. Spiritually speaking, each spouse has “half of a soul,” and together they complete each other. The Talmud states that God created Adam with two faces: one in each direction. God split them in two, and one half became Eve. The union of man and woman in marriage returns them to their unified state.

parable, Rabbi Meir quotes, “The fathers eat unripe sour grapes and the teeth of the children are stumped.”⁴⁴

A fox was about to be devoured by a hungry lion. The shrewd fox said to his attacker, “How satisfied can you be by eating me? Come, let me show you a person you can eat, who will surely satisfy your hunger.” When the lion saw the person, it said, “I am afraid that this pious person will bring me down with his prayers.” The fox put the lion at ease and said to him, “Don’t worry. Nothing will happen to you or to your son. Your misdeed will not be punished until the time of your grandson. Now go and satisfy your hunger. It will be a long time before your grandson is born.” The lion accepted the fox’s reasoning and jumped to attack the innocent person. As it moved in for the kill, it fell into a deep pit that had been hidden by branches. As the fox caught up with the captured lion and looked down into the pit, the lion said, “Didn’t you assure me that the punishment would not affect me and my son, but would only affect my grandson?” Answered the fox, “That’s true. You were not captured because of your misdeed but because of the misdeed of your grandfather.” The lion protested and said, “That’s not fair. The fathers eat the unripe sour grapes and the teeth of the children are stumped.” The fox smiled and said, “Why did you not consider that before?”⁴⁵

The Torah states that the punishment of a sin committed today can be meted out to a person’s children for up to four generations.⁴⁶

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44. Quoted from the summary of a *shiur* given by Rabbi Avraham Kahn, based on Ezekiel 18:2. Retrieved: <http://www.shemayisrael.com/parsha/kahn/archives/achrei66.htm>.

45. *Sanhedrin* 38b.

46. “He remembers the sins of the fathers upon children and grandchildren

The following oft-quoted words of God bear repeating, for we do not always recall the full passage in the Torah. “I have put before you life and death, a blessing and a curse: so choose life for yourselves *and for your descendants*.”⁴⁷ Our choices today alter the future for our children and their children’s children.⁴⁸ The Talmud reminds us that a wise person will think ahead:

One day as Choni Hama’agel (“the circle-drawer”) was traveling along the road, he saw a man planting a carob tree. Choni asked him, “How long will it take for this tree to bear fruit?” “Seventy years,” the man replied. “Do you think that you will live another 70 years?” Choni asked. The man replied, “I found carob trees growing when I was born, because my forefathers planted them for me, so I, too, plant them for my children.”⁴⁹

PREVIOUS GENERATIONS

We are all connected—not just to one another but beyond the bounds of time: the past directing the present, and the present, the past. Since time and space are only a function of the physical

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to the third and fourth generation” (Exodus 34:7). Our fate is not sealed because of the actions of previous generations. This sentence is in effect only as long as the children continue to pursue the sinful ways of the father (*Berachos* 7a).

47. Deuteronomy 30:19. The Thirteen Attributes of God include Preserver of Kindness for thousands of generations, which our Rabbis tell us speaks to how our good deeds bring benefit to our offspring well into the future.

48. In a spiritual sense, we pass down to our children our chief characteristics—those that are part of our essential being. Our children thus carry out our spiritual tasks (Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler, *Strive for Truth*, Vol. 5, 59). If we do not correct a *middah* that is within our level of *bechirah*, we put our children at a spiritual disadvantage, for they will find it easier to repeat our mistakes than to rise above them.

49. *Ta’anis* 23a.

world, not only do past generations affect us, but we affect them.

The Gemara teaches that the “inheritor is an heir as the legs of his father,” that is, the actions of one’s biological offspring and spiritual heirs in this world affect his soul’s position in *Gan Eden*.⁵⁰ For instance, if we learned a lesson from a person prior to his death, and we are now able to do a *mitzvah* because of it, then his spiritual status is elevated. Hence, on Yom Kippur even the souls in Heaven are judged. The impact of what these souls did while alive brings about changes in their Heavenly status each year.

Chillingly so, the opposite is true. “Because of the sins of the living, the dead are disinterred from their graves.”⁵¹ The impact again reverberates back to us. The Gemara states, “It is also testified that the faithful departed pray for those who are alive, without which the latter would be unable to subsist for a single day or even part of a day.”⁵² Our actions in this world alter the spiritual status of those in the next world, which then puts those souls into a better or worse position to assist us in this world.⁵³

THE UPPER WORLDS

God created a system wherein the waves of free will in *Olam Hazei* crash on the shores of the spiritual realm. The *Zohar* reveals

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50. *Eruvin* 70b. Rabbi Tzvi Hebel (*The Neshuma Should Have an Aliyah* [Judaica Press, 2009]) brings down other sources to explain that all of a child’s meritorious deeds automatically benefit the departed parent, irrespective of the parent’s contribution; unlike a spiritual heir who benefits the deceased through conduct that extends from the departed person’s teachings. This process is not limited to these types of relationships—parent or mentor—and extend to anyone. The difference, authorities note, is that the one performing a deed (in merit of the deceased) has to stipulate this intent before fulfilling the *mitzvah* (*ibid.*, 35).

51. *Yevamos* 63b.

52. *Shabbos* 89b.

53. The *Kaddish* that is said just before *Aleinu* (or right after *Aleinu* for Ashkenazim) is considered the “orphan’s” *Kaddish*, and if the son recites it

that when man accomplishes God's will below, he causes a parallel rectification above.⁵⁴ The Nefesh HaChaim explains,

When God created man, He empowered him to control countless forces and worlds... . With his good deeds, words, and thoughts, man sustains and gives energy to countless forces and holy celestial worlds, increasing their holiness and light... .⁵⁵ All of man's actions, words, and thoughts cause a reaction in the upper worlds, that is, in the root of all things.⁵⁶

We are judged for both our positive and negative influences on others in this world and also for the impact of our actions on the higher worlds and powers.⁵⁷ The Nefesh HaChaim continues,

[P]lease have pity and compassion on the precious higher worlds, which were created with wisdom, understanding, and knowledge. Be careful not to impair any of them through an improper thought. The upper worlds do not recover until the forces of pollution are eliminated when the sinners receive the punishment they deserve. When that happens, the worlds are healed from the blight and regain their original purity. Another way for the worlds to regain their wholeness is through the sincere *teshuvah* of the sinner.⁵⁸

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during the eleven months of his parents' passing, as well as on the anniversary of their passing (*Yahrzeit*) every year, it: (1) saves one's parents from judgment in *Gehinnom* and (2) helps raise them into *Gan Eden* and elevate their souls from one level to the next.

54. *Zohar* I:35a.

55. Rabbi Chaim Volozhin, *Nefesh HaChaim* 1:3, 31.

56. *Ibid.*, 1:4, trans., 34.

57. Rabbi Chaim Volozhin, *Nefesh HaChaim* 1:6.

58. *Ibid.*, 50–51, 55,

He adds that the amount of damage that is caused above is dependent upon the soul of the sinner. A small misdeed of a person with a lofty soul causes great damage in heaven, while a serious offence by an inferior soul makes less of an impact above.⁵⁹

FINAL REDEMPTION

Because all Jewish souls are inexorably linked, the errors of the righteous may lead to the willful violations of the wicked. The converse is also true. The willful violations of the wicked may lead to the errors of the righteous.⁶⁰ Irrespective of our spiritual station, “All Jews are responsible for each other.”⁶¹ Our actions purify or pollute the collective pool and increase or decrease the traction of those around us and all over.⁶²

When we fulfill our potential, we seal a crack in the vessel of humanity (and, to a larger extent, in creation itself) and allow for all of mankind to more easily align with its purpose. In doing so, we hasten the coming of the Messiah. God thus made the rectification and elevation of all creation dependent on the Jewish people.

ALL FOR GOD

According to the *Midrash*: “When Israel does the will of God, they add strength to the power Above, as it is written, ‘Give

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59. *Ibid.*, 85.

60. See *Sfas Emes, Nitzavim* 5635.

61. *Shavuot* 39a. The Torah states “... and a man will stumble over his brother” (Leviticus 26:37). Rashi (*ibid.*) explains that we can err in our own behavior because of the behavior of others. Most of us would be quite stunned if we fully comprehended how our seemingly minor deeds and misdeeds can become a life-and-death influence in the lives of so many people, especially those closest to us.

62. “A person should always imagine that the fate of the whole world depends upon his actions” (*Zohar* II: 42a).

strength to God.’”⁶³ But when Israel fails to do the will of God, they weaken the strength Above, so to speak, as it is written, “You have weakened the Rock that begot you.”⁶⁴ Likewise, the *Zohar* states, “When the Jewish people are virtuous, they give God strength, as the verse says, ‘Give strength to God.’ How can one give strength to God? By performing good deeds.”⁶⁵

The Nefesh HaChaim tempers this statement by explaining that “... all the deeds of man, be they good or bad, do not affect [His essence].”⁶⁶ Nonetheless, it is a mind-bending notion that God arranged for our actions to touch Him, as it were. And this revelation is all the more marvelous in that this actuality exists because it is God’s will.

Imagine two people in a small rowboat, as one begins to drill a hole into the hull beneath his seat. The other screams, “What are you doing?” and the man answers, “What are you getting so upset about? I’m making a hole under my seat, not yours.”⁶⁷ We are never justified in believing that we alone bear the consequence of our sins. With supreme arrogance, we may think, *I know this is wrong, and I will probably be angry with myself afterward, but I will worry about that later.* With truncated foresight, we decide that the instant indulgence is worth the tradeoff. How wrong we are.

NOTES

63. *Midrash Rabbah Eichah* 1:33. Stated by R. Azariyah in the name of R. Yehudah, son of R. Simon (on Psalms 60:14).

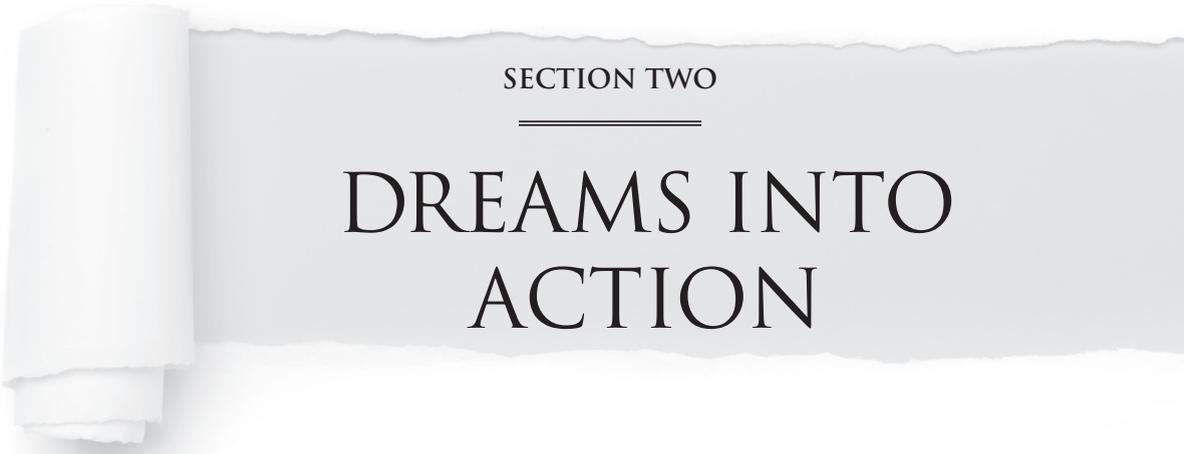
64. Deuteronomy 32:18.

65. *Zohar*, 2:32b, quoted by *Nefesh HaChaim* (*Shaar* 1:3).

66. *Ibid.*

67. *Vayikra Rabbah* 4:6.





SECTION TWO

DREAMS INTO ACTION

We have learned that actualizing our free will consists of intertwining objectives. Moving closer toward God through character refinement (and resonating God-consciousness) is at the crux of our personal mandate, but we each have a unique purpose and destiny to fulfill, and we must actualize our God-given talents to perfect ourselves and, in the process, our world.

This section offers a range of Torah insights and psychological strategies to help us reach our goals, achieve mastery over ourselves, and enjoy success in our relationships. Many of the ideas presented in each of the following chapters can be applied to our overall strategy in other areas. Furthermore, success in one area also helps us maximize efficacy in others.

- ❑ Methods that we use to regulate our behavior in specific instances can be applied to help us stick to our long-term goals, and the benefits are mutual. The less frustrated we are with the direction of our lives, the easier it is to exercise self-control and to invest in our long-term well-being.
- ❑ The healthier our relationships, the healthier we are, and the more able we are to move responsibly toward our life's purpose without the need for ego-oriented approval or surrendering to the blinding fix of immediate gratification. Likewise, the happier we are with the

direction and pace of our lives, the less frustrated we are with ourselves, and the more tolerant and patient we become with others.

- ❑ The more we give in to ourselves, the more we demand that the world accommodate us, setting the stage for unhealthy interactions and relationships. Equally true, the healthier our relationships, the better we feel about ourselves and our lives. And as such, we are less inclined toward anger-fueled self-destructive behaviors.

We cannot ignore an important aspect of our life and expect to be whole. Attempting to rid oneself of a negative character trait, for example, while disregarding a faltering relationship is akin to sticking wings on a caterpillar and expecting it to fly. In order to grow in a balanced, healthy direction, we must integrate critical aspects of our lives and character.

PART 8

REANIMATING FREE WILL

The God-given gift of free will bestowed on all human beings is secondary to the Divine gift of awareness. As the Talmud says, “A greater sign of our preciousness to God is that He told us we were created in His image.”¹ This means that human beings have the freedom to forge their own reality, destiny, and eternity. But no amount of willpower can motivate us when we have abandoned genuine pleasure in favor of a comfortable numbness. In the following chapters, we will learn how to push off the dead weight of apathy and reignite our passion for life.

NOTES

1. Ethics of the Fathers 3:18.



“I am the Lord, Your God, Who took you out of the land of Egypt from being slaves.”² God’s introduction to the Jewish people at Sinai does not testify that He is the Creator of Heaven and Earth. The Sages explain that such a declaration might lead us to a grievous error—to think of God as Creator, but not as Sustainer, and mistakenly conclude that He does not desire a relationship with us or directly supervise the affairs of man.³

This prelude also cements the significance of bondage. Our relationship with God hinges on free will, and our enslavement, while an impingement to its expression, was also a prerequisite to its manifestation. The Jewish people needed the concept of oppression to become embedded in their spiritual DNA in order to fully comprehend and appreciate the beauty of freedom.⁴

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2. See Exodus 20:2.

3. *Kuzari* 1:1, 2. The message is, “You matter to Me.” The entire mechanism of self-esteem is geared toward creating ourselves into a vessel that is capable of recognizing and receiving God’s love for us. Only then do we live with the perpetual awareness that He takes an intimate and personal interest in every aspect of our lives, and that everything we do matters deeply to Him. Absent self-esteem we cannot help but feel that we do not matter to God, that we are irrelevant. Nothing is more painful or false.

4. See the discussion in Chapter 37, “A World of Contrasts.” There are other

ONWARD

The foundation of free will and our formation as a nation require that we be a free people, with the ability to serve God. “God said to Moses, ‘Go to Pharaoh, and say to him, “Thus says God: ‘Let My people go so that they may serve Me.’”⁵ After the tenth plague, Pharaoh yielded, and the Jews took leave. But let us back up a bit. When Moses readied the Jewish people, there wasn’t necessarily a stampede for the exit.

Eighty percent of the Jews died in Egypt, because they chose to stay.⁶ They suffered from a slave mentality. And even for those who did take leave, God took precautions. When Pharaoh finally relented to let the Jewish people leave, God led them on a longer, circuitous route out of Egypt, toward Israel. He knew that if He took them out on the direct course, they might be inclined to retreat—and God said, “Perhaps the people will have a change of heart if they encounter war, and they will return to Egypt.”⁷

As much as the Jews suffered brutally at the hands of the Egyptians, life in Egypt offered an existence free of decision and self-doubt—the antithesis of free will. The allure of a life free from the burden of thinking was too tempting. Plunging to the forty-ninth level of impurity, the spark of the Jewish *neshamah* was all but extinguished.

Even for those whose trust in God propelled them toward the Promised Land, their choice for freedom was stained with regret. When the Jewish people faced a challenge in the Wilderness, they voiced their distress—ten times. “With ten trials did our ancestors test the Holy One, blessed be He, in the desert, as it is said, ‘They

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explanations for the Egyptian exile regarding the *klipos* (“impure barriers” or “shells”). See Arizal, *Shaar Hagilgulim*.

5. Exodus 7:26.

6. Rashi, Exodus 13:18, from *Mechilta* and *Tanchumah* 1.

7. Exodus 13:17.

have tested Me these ten times and did not hearken to My voice.’”⁸ The Talmud chronicles the episodes, which include complaining for water at *Marah*, the sin of the Golden Calf, and leaving over *manna*.⁹ Other incidents, in the people’s own words:

- ❑ If only we had died by the hand of God in Egypt when we sat by the pot of meat, when we ate our fill of bread. For you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill the entire congregation by famine.¹⁰
- ❑ [T]he children of Israel also wept again, and said, Who shall give us flesh to eat? We remember the fish that we ate in Egypt for nothing; the cucumbers, and the melons, and the leeks, and the onions, and the garlic, but now our soul is dried away; there is nothing at all save this *manna* to look forward to.¹¹
- ❑ If only we had perished as our brethren perished before God! Why have you brought the congregation of God to this wilderness to die, we and our animals? And why did you have to have us ascend from Egypt to bring us to this evil place? Not a place of seed or fig or grape, or pomegranate, and there is no water to drink!”¹²

Their faculty to deal with uncertainty had been crushed, because their capacity to trust in God was handicapped, despite the succession of open miracles. The reason is, as we stated, that trust is a function of choice, and with the muscle of free will atrophied, the Jewish people struggled to trust in God, no matter how evident

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8. Ethics of the Fathers 5:6.

9. *Erchin* 15a; Exodus 15:24; *ibid.*, 32:1–6; *ibid.*, 16:20.

10. *Ibid.*, 16:3.

11. Numbers 11:4–6.

12. *Ibid.*, 14:22, 20:35.

His Presence. Hence, the desire for familiarity displaced their innate yearning for self-expression and a relationship with God.¹³

When a climactic scene unfolds where the Jewish people are trapped between the Egyptian army and the Red Sea, they do not turn to fight—this generation was accustomed to the yoke of domination.¹⁴ Without belief in themselves and without trust in God, how could the Israelites stand up for themselves, much less to their former oppressors?¹⁵

The desert offers no natural means of protection or sustenance. The years of wandering helped eradicate the slave mentality and allowed the Jewish people to reconnect with their humanity and reestablish their capacity to trust in God.¹⁶ Yet this was not enough. The collective Jewish soul needed to shed itself of this crippling mindset. Without mentioning the years that had elapsed, the *parashah* (“Torah portion”) picks up approximately forty years later. The entire generation of Egyptian-born former slaves—anyone over the age of twenty—had died.¹⁷

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13. King David writes, “I am Your servant, son of Your handmaid” (Psalms 116). Rashi explains this to mean that the slave who is born to a handmaid is considerably more submissive than one who was born free. Similarly, when zoos receive animals that have been bred in captivity, their instinct for freedom is largely absent. Their desire to escape pales in contrast to their born-in-the-wild counterparts, because when an animal is moved from its natural, free environment into captivity, most never settle down, even after many years.

14. *Gittin* 13a.

15. Ibn Ezra, Exodus 14:13.

16. The purpose of *mitzvos* is so that the People of Israel will put their trust in God (*Peirush HaGra*, Proverbs 22:19). As we explained, responsible action—i.e. doing God’s will—is the surest and swiftest path to transform faith into trust. This entire section offers insights and strategies geared toward this primary objective.

17. “In this desert will fall all the bodies of all who were counted from the age of twenty and above ...” (Numbers 14:29). The only two adults who did not die were Joshua and Caleb.

THE IGNORANCE OF APATHY

The surest path to misery is to continue to put up with all of the things that do not work in our lives but are not quite bad enough to make us feel that we must change them. Human beings can become used to almost anything. That's both the good news and the bad.

When the funeral procession accompanying Jacob's coffin arrived at his final resting place at *Meoras HaMachpelah*, Esau confronted the mourners, contesting the title to Jacob's plot.¹⁸ The tribes argued that Esau had sold it to Jacob. A debate ensued in which each side claimed the right to this holy site. When Esau asked for Jacob's deed, certifying his purchase of the burial plot, the tribes decided to send Naftali back to Egypt to retrieve the deed. In the meantime, they would wait. Chushim ben Dan, who was deaf, was present during this dialogue and inquired regarding the cause of the delay. When he was told what was occurring, he exclaimed, "My grandfather will be compelled to lie in degradation until the deed is brought!" He immediately arose and struck Esau.¹⁹

Why was it that Chushim was the only one who was so reactive? Was he more concerned about Jacob's honor than Jacob's own sons, who seemed to be negotiating with Esau?

Rabbi Chaim Shmuelevitz, *z"l*, suggests that the Talmud implies the answer when it refers to Chushim's deafness. The brothers had slowly been drawn into a discussion with Esau. While the debate continued back and forth, they thought they were besting Esau. Although this might have been true,

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18. Lit., "cave of the double tombs"—where Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Leah were already buried.

19. *Sotah* 13a.

during this time period Jacob's body lay in shame. They did not realize what they were doing. Human nature causes one to adapt slowly to a given situation. The brothers' dispute with Esau dulled their sensitivity to their father's shame. Chushim was not a part of the debate because of his impairment... . His senses were not dulled... .

Rabbi Shmuelewitz explains that human beings are endowed with the gift of *histaglus*, "adaptability." We adapt to the conditions in which we are placed. We have seen people who had been exposed to the unspeakable horrors of the concentration camps, who experienced the most cruel and heinous torture, survive to rebuild their lives. As circumstances worsened, they found the ability to adapt to the situation, the courage and fortitude to go on.

Indeed, one who has undergone a tragedy or has survived a horrifying incident will certainly be changed by the experience. The power to continue, to go on and start over again, is due to adaptability. This wonderful gift can, at times, be less beneficial. Like every attribute endowed to us by the Almighty, it all depends upon how we use it.²⁰

The opposite of love is not hate. It is apathy. A relationship in which one does not have any feelings toward another is patently less viable than a relationship in which one, at times, becomes angry with the other. Similarly, a person who proclaims to hate his life is more in touch with his emotions than one who does not care to consider why he is alive.

The pleasure-pain mechanism is what keeps us moving in the right direction, but just as a person lying unconscious under anesthesia cannot feel the pain of a cut, it also fails us when we are numb to the pain. When neither inspiration nor desperation

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20. Rabbi A. Leib Scheinbaum of the Hebrew Academy of Cleveland. Quoted in *Peninim*, 54–55.

is sufficient to rouse our soul from its slumber, we are stuck in the torturous twilight of indifference.

The option of moving forward or living our lives in the relative comfort of the familiar and predictable exists for all of us—to remain in our own Egypt or to set out for the Promised Land. Yet when we have accustomed ourselves to existing, rather than living, the real tragedy is not that we have lost our way, but that we do not care that there is a way.



27 | A COMMITTED LIFE

We combat the slave mentality by constantly moving forward. “For a man is born to strive and toil.”²¹ Scattered or misdirected ambition, however, is as debilitating as inactivity itself. Movement is useless without a plan—we need a place to go and a path to get there.

We must not live our lives like the person who shoots an arrow at the side of a barn and then draws a circle around it after it embeds itself.²² Caring little for what he aims for, he proudly convinces himself and the world that he is a success. Many people are indeed reluctant to plan their lives. They may have a vague idea of what they want to accomplish, yet they shy away from preparing for their future. This is true for two interlacing reasons.

What exactly does planning for the future involve? At the most elementary level, we must acknowledge where we are and then decide where we want to go. The challenge here exists as much in the first half of this process as in the second. Yes, the future is filled with many unknowns and uncertainties, but the hidden fear lies in not wanting to see where we are. We are afraid

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21. Job 5:7.

22. The Dubno *Maggid* (“storyteller”) would create a story around the lesson and used this analogy to explain why his stories always hit home. (Born in Zateil, Lithuania in 1740, Rabbi Yaakov Krantz was a gifted orator and scholar who was known throughout Europe as the Dubno *Maggid*.)

to examine our lives too closely and to come face-to-face with who we have become and with what has become of our finest intentions. The reluctance to set goals and plan for the future relieves us of the burden of self-examination. Yet another deep-seated incentive exists.

In order to move forward, we need to weigh different possibilities and directions that our lives can take. To do this, we must know what we are living for. In a word: commit. But we would rather get lost in the grand scheme of daydreaming than be forced to make choices that will forever define who we are.²³ We half-believe that if we never make a choice, we won't have to live with failure or regret.²⁴

So rather than move our lives forward, we leave ourselves open to every possibility, with the misplaced hope that the perfect opportunity will present itself. But research shows what is self-evident: "Freedom of choice is a two-edged sword, for just on the other side of liberation sits chaos and paralysis."²⁵ Too many choices often overwhelm a person into inaction, and the more options available, the greater the likelihood that we will come to regret our decision, whatever it is.²⁶ The paradox of decision making shows us that when presented with an abundance of choices, people are most inclined to:²⁷

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23. The English word *decide* has the same etymological root as *homicide*: the Latin word *cadre*, meaning "to cut down" or "to kill."

24. Functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) has been used to show that the amygdala is stimulated when we make decisions couched in uncertainty. Our brain is literally afraid of being wrong. See Benedetto De Martino et al., "Frames, Biases, and Rational Decision-Making in the Human Brain," *Science* 313 (2006): 684–687.

25. Barry Schwartz, "Self-Determination: The Tyranny of Freedom," *American Psychologist* 55, no. 1 (2000): 79–88.

26. "Can There Ever Be Too Many Flowers Blooming?" Barry Schwartz, to appear in W. Ivey and S. J. Tepper, eds., *Engaging Art: The Next Great Transformation of America's Cultural Life* (New York: Routledge).

27. *Ibid.*

- Opt for the same old choice as a way to avoid facing unlimited options.
- Rely on filters (i.e., society), rather than on themselves.
- Become more passive in their lives.

MORE CHOICE, LESS ACTION

In Numbers, the Torah discusses the five remarkably righteous daughters of Tzelafchad, who had not yet married. Their father died, leaving no son to inherit his portion of the Land. In the absence of a male heir, it was expected that the inheritance would fall to their uncle. The daughters of Tzelafchad did not want to lose the opportunity to take possession of a portion of the Holy Land, and they approached Moses for help. Their request was simple: Since there were no sons, let their father's portion fall to them, his daughters. Moses, in turn, posed the question to God, who commanded that the daughters of Tzelafchad be given their father's inheritance in the Land.²⁸ Later, God stipulated that the daughters marry within their father's tribe so that their inheritance would stay within the tribe and not eventually become part of another tribe's portion by virtue of their husbands' lineage.

Notably, as soon as these women were instructed to choose husbands from a specific tribe, the Torah tells us they were married.²⁹ Though there are surely other explanations, we can understand the connection in light of our discussion here.³⁰ God helped them fulfill their destiny by narrowing their choices to men from one out of twelve tribes.

In all areas of life, excessive choice is debilitating, not liberating.

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28. Numbers 27:1–7.

29. *Ibid.*, 36.

30. No doubt, in their righteousness, these women now felt an obligation to marry as quickly as possible to men of their tribe so as to fulfill the Divine command and perpetuate the inheritance of their tribe.

One such study found that the more choices that were offered for a retirement fund, the less likely employees were to enroll in any program at all.³¹ What makes this all the more shocking is that by not participating, employees passed up as much as \$5,000 a year in matching contributions from the employer.

In another revealing and perhaps relatable experiment, researchers set up a tasting table in a neighborhood supermarket. When a selection of jams was on display, shoppers showed more interest in the larger assortment (twenty-four varieties) than in the smaller assortment (six varieties). In fact, customers stopped 60 percent of the time for the wider selection, compared with just 40 percent for the smaller selection. Yet when it came time to actually make a purchase, of the consumers who stopped at the table with twenty-four varieties, only 3 percent bought jam. At the booth with a more limited selection, however, 30 percent made a purchase. In short, those presented with the smaller assortment were *ten times more likely* to take positive action.³²

For effective decision making, Nobel Laureate Herb Simon, Ph.D., suggests the “satisfying” option: the first choice that fits our preference, as opposed to exhaustively scanning all options until finding the perfect or “maximizing” one.³³ Expressed differently: the energy expended on deciding between two or more viable options is always greater than any marginal advantage gained.

Perfection—the henchman of procrastination—is demoralizing.

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31. Sheena S. Iyengar, Gur Huberman, and Wei Jiang, “How Much Choice Is Too Much? Contributions to 401(k) Retirement Plans,” *Pension Design and Structure: New Lessons from Behavioral Finance*. Specifically, for every 50 new funds added to the selection, the participation rate fell by 10 percent.

32. Ilan Brat, Ellen Byron, and Ann Zimmerman, “Retailers Cut Back on Variety, Once the Spice of Marketing,” *Wall Street Journal* (2009).

33. In another industry, when Proctor & Gamble reduced the number of versions of its Head and Shoulders shampoo from 26 to 15, sales increased by 10 percent. See Sheena S. Iyengar and Mark R. Lepper, “When Choice Is Demotivating: Can One Desire Too Much of a Good Thing?” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 79, no. 6 (2000): 995–1006.

“God looked upon all that He made and, behold, it was very good.”³⁴ Not perfect.³⁵ We should not let an irrational quest for perfection keep us from making decisions and moving ahead.³⁶ And lest we think otherwise, neither intelligence nor talent will shield us against the crime of procrastination. On the contrary, *Cheshbon HaNefesh* states:

There are those people who are intelligent and quick in a certain field of learning or in a certain craft but who lack the ideas or experience in other fields. When faced with a situation they ponder, then they consult and think again interminably. This man’s virtue is, in truth, his problem. Because he is intelligent, he can always find endless rationales that support different courses of action. Because of his inability to reach a final decision, opportunity passes him by or he delays an enterprise with his hesitation for days or years thus sacrificing their benefits for long periods of time.³⁷

It is human nature to want to keep our options open, and as the ego looms larger, the fear of commitment is magnified—it cannot be wrong or feel restricted. It is always looking for a way out should we want to escape.³⁸ Yet this back door is built out of fear (aka a lack of *bitachon*), and indecision does not free us, it keeps us trapped—and it bends us into someone who is afraid to live. Because nothing will become of our lives—NOTHING—until we

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34. Genesis 1:31.

35. God is perfect, but we are not Him. Let us strive for excellence, not perfection.

36. “A good plan today is better than a perfect plan tomorrow” (George S. Patton, 1885–1945, American army general during World War II).

37. Rabbi Menachem Mendel Levin, *Cheshbon HaNefesh*, 137.

38. In *Think and Grow Rich*, Napoleon Hill recounts the true story of the Spanish general Hernan Cortez whose forces were outnumbered ten to one. “A long while ago, a great warrior faced a situation which made it necessary for him to make a decision which ensured his success on the battlefield. He was

decide what we want out of life, and there's no enduring success without a profound commitment to that decision. Without recognition of this truth, we cannot go any further.

A DEFINITIVE PURPOSE

The seminal work on personal development, *Mesillas Yescharim*, opens with the necessity for clarity of purpose: "The foundation of devotion and the root of service [to God] is to clarify ... what one's obligation is in the world, and what he must place his focus and direction on, all the days of his life."

We must know what we are living for, because to achieve anything worthwhile we are required to spend much of our time devoted to the arduous and the mundane. Only a strong sense of purpose can give our lives the meaning and inherent pleasure we need to endure the relentless onslaught of obstacles and distractions. Victory will not come in one sweeping burst of inspiration. Yes, there will be special, near-magical moments, but they are generated and sustained by our own will. It is a self-defeating myth that we should feel consistently inspired, and if we are not, then we are doing something wrong.

Emotion is a powerful ally, and we should mine the meaning within our goal, to infuse significance into our actions, but this does not mean that we should expect to enjoy every inch of our pursuit or that we should cease to press on when a span turns

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about to send his armies against a powerful foe, whose men outnumbered his own. He loaded his soldiers into boats, sailed to the enemy's country, unloaded soldiers and equipment, then gave the order to burn the ships that had carried them. Addressing the men before the first battle, he said, 'You see the boats going up in smoke. That means that we cannot leave these shores unless we win! We now have no choice—we win—or we perish!' They won. Every person who wins in any undertaking must be willing to burn his ships and cut all sources of retreat. Only by so doing can one be sure of maintaining that state of mind known as a burning desire to win, essential to success" (New York: Fawcett Books, 1987).

dull or tedious. The professional works when he does not feel like it, while the amateur dabbles only when he feels inspired. Success comes to those who are prepared to do the things that other people don't like to do and aren't willing to do.

Research supports what life experience confirms: commitment—an unswerving dedication—is the most powerful source of motivation and can lead us to persist, even in the face of daunting opposition.³⁹ In a former United States president's oft-quoted words:

Nothing in the world can take the place of persistence. Talent will not; nothing is more common than unsuccessful men with talent. Genius will not; unrewarded genius is almost a proverb. Education will not; the world is full of educated derelicts. Persistence and determination are [invincible].⁴⁰

A great *mussar* teacher writes, “If a person has a commitment, all his senses act as instruments which bring out his thoughts and commitments to action ... [because] after a commitment, nothing more is needed.”⁴¹

A WILL TO WIN

Although our success is ultimately up to God, the amount of human effort required to bring us that success seems to be quantifiable. The 10,000 Hour Rule is based on a groundbreaking study that divided students into three groups based on skill (amateur, impressive, and expert or concert-level) at the Berlin Academy of

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39. John P. Meyer, Thomas E. Becker, and Christian Vandenberghe, “Employee Commitment and Motivation: A Conceptual Analysis and Integrative Model,” *Journal of Applied Psychology* 89, no. 6 (2004): 991–1007

40. John Calvin Coolidge, Jr. (1872–1933), thirtieth president of the United States.

41. Rabbi Dovid Bleicher, *Divrei Binah U'Mussar*, 141–142.

Music and then correlated achievement with hours of practice.

Among these three groups, the difference came down to a single factor: the amount of time spent in solitary practice by the age of twenty. The amateur group averaged 4,000 hours of practice; the impressive musicians put in approximately 6,000 hours; and the group with concert-level potential totaled around 10,000 hours of practice.⁴²

This rule was then applied to research in other disciplines— from the arts to the sciences— and indisputable results were found to support the hypothesis. A renowned neurologist and cognitive psychologist explains the findings:

In study after study, of composers, basketball players, fiction writers, ice skaters, concert pianists, chess players, master criminals, and what have you, this number comes up again and again. Of course it doesn't address why some people get more out of their practice sessions than others do. But no one has yet found a case in which true world-class expertise was accomplished in less time. It seems that it takes the brain this long to assimilate all that it needs to know to achieve true mastery.⁴³

More than thirty years of research into achievement have been culled and compiled in the *Cambridge Handbook of Expertise and Expert Performance*. Having examined a range of individuals from Mozart to Einstein, the conclusion is that genius is built, not born.

[I]t isn't magic, and it isn't born. It happens because some critical things line up so that a person of good intelligence

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42. K. A. Ericsson and N. Charness, "Expert Performance: Its Structure and Acquisition," *American Psychologist*, 49 (1994): 725–747.

43. Daniel Levitin, *Foundations of Cognitive Psychology: Core Readings* (Massachusetts: M.I.T. Press, 2002).

can put in the sustained, focused effort it takes to achieve extraordinary mastery... . These people don't necessarily have an especially high IQ, but they almost always have very supportive environments, and they almost always have important mentors. And the one thing they always have is this incredible investment of effort.⁴⁴

There will never be a perfect time for anything, and if we wait for all of the stars to align before taking action, we are, in blunt language, waiting for our death.⁴⁵ Great people across a wide range of fields and industries are identified by a pattern of conscience and conviction: they decide, commit, and persist. They know who they are and what they want, and they simply do not give up. Modern research is easily summed up with centuries-old wisdom of the Talmud: "In the way one is determined to go, he will be led."⁴⁶

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44. Anders Ericsson, editor, *The Cambridge Handbook of Expertise and Expert Performance* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

45. "Generally, one must be content to rely on logic [and then] make his determination based on probability" Rabbi Menachem Mendel Levin, *Cheshbon HaNefesh*, 137.

46. *Makkos* 10b. More precisely translated: "The way a person wants to be led—they lead him." In his commentary on the Talmud (*ibid.*), Rabbi Shmuel Eliezer Eidels asks, who are "they" who lead the person where he wants to go? He answers that these are angels that a person creates with his own thoughts, speech, and actions. We might add that "they" also implies a supportive environment, as well as the forces of the world that become mobilized to help one to achieve success, should his desire be sufficient enough to garner it.



Moving forward with a definitive purpose not only fortifies our resolve, but it enables a powerful emotional catalyst for responsible action: a relevance to death. The Baal HaTanya writes that a person has two ways open to him: the way of life (which is to see God via a reduction of ego), and the way of death.⁴⁷ Ethics of the Fathers resounds with themes that foster humility through the lens of mortality, such as: “Be exceedingly humble in spirit, for the anticipated end of mortal man is worms;”⁴⁸ and “Know from whence you come—from a putrid drop; and where you are going—to a place of dust, worms, and maggots.”⁴⁹

Death was a consequence of the first sin, because, in part, reflecting on death can purge us of the *yetzer hara*.⁵⁰ The prospect of death is not a punishment. It is the antidote to rid oneself of the ego.⁵¹ The well-known *mussar sefer Chovos HaLevavos* states, “Our days are

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47. See Deuteronomy 30.

48. Ethics of the Fathers 4:4.

49. Ibid., 3:1.

50. Man had to be banished from the Garden of Eden so that he would not be able to eat from the Tree of Life and live forever (Rambam, *Sforno* on Genesis 2:8–17).

51. “Torah, prayer, and the contemplation of death will help you in your struggle against the Evil Inclination” (*Berachos* 5a).

like pages in a book; inscribe in them that which you want to be remembered for.”⁵² It is imperative to note the passage of time in order to utilize it properly. Without the deadline of mortality, how much value would we place on life?⁵³

Death prompts us to concede that we are not owners of anything other than our choices. While we all meet the same fate of the physicality, our eternal fate is uniquely our own—and of our own choosing. It is precisely death, and the reflection on this fragile and finite existence, that punctures the illusion of this world and deflates the ego.⁵⁴ It becomes clear, then, why the wisest of men counsels, “It is better to go to the house of mourning than to go to a house of feasting,” because, he adds, “[death] is the end of all man, and the living should take it to heart.”⁵⁵

DATE WITH DESTINY

Although we should not preoccupy ourselves with thoughts of our demise, the only way to live with intellectual honesty is to acknowledge that one day it is an absolute certainty that the sun will rise and set without us in this world. If we find this depressing, rather than motivating, we are not alone. In fact, we belong to the overwhelming majority.

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52. *Chovos HaLevavos, Shaar Cheshbon HaNefesh, Cheshbon* 11.

53. Parkinson’s law states, “Work expands to fill the time available.” In other words, if something is allotted a week, it will take a week to accomplish it; if we have two weeks, it will take two weeks. Regardless of whether we have short Friday afternoons in the winter or long ones in the summer, people are always ready for Shabbos at sunset. Somehow, there’s always “just enough time.” The feeling that we have an entire lifetime to accomplish a goal can impede forward movement. With such an attitude, it is difficult to accomplish our goals, because there is no sense of necessity, much less urgency.

54. When the Talmud teaches that we should repent one day before our death, it is to encourage us to recognize the possibility that today may be our last day alive (Ethics of the Fathers 2:15, *Shabbos* 153a).

55. Ecclesiastes 7:2.

The approaching threat of death, as a positive motivator, has zero traction in the lives of those who have no life. On the contrary, thinking of death does not make us want to live, but, rather, we welcome our final exit, so that we can permanently escape. A Harvard professor and president of Preventive Medicine and Research Institute writes,

People may initially get interested in changing their lifestyle because they are hurting, but what sustains these changes is not fear of dying, it's joy of living... . What often lies at the root of self-destructive behaviors is loneliness, depression, and isolation. The number-one epidemic in America is not obesity or heart disease, it is depression. The most commonly prescribed prescription drugs last year were antidepressants. We assume that people want to live longer, but telling somebody that they are going to live longer if they just quit smoking and change their diet is not very motivating if they are depressed, stressed out, and unhappy.⁵⁶

We are trying to kill ourselves because we want to die, and being informed that our actions will hasten our death only incentivizes self-destructive behavior. In the Torah, God warns the Jewish nation: "Be careful that you do not go up the mountain or touch the edge of it; whoever touches the mountain shall surely die. Do not set your hand upon it, for he shall surely be stoned."⁵⁷

First, God states the consequence for touching the mountain. Then, He issues a command against doing so, because the first warning was inconsequential to most of the people—they were willing to die in order to become closer to God. When death is

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56. Dr. Dean Ornish, distinguished clinical professor of medicine at Harvard University and known for his lifestyle-driven approach to the control of coronary artery disease (CAD) and other chronic diseases.

57. Exodus 19:12–13.

not a deterrent, it does not stop behavior. Certainly, *Klal Yisrael* did not suffer from low self-esteem, but this event points to the above-mentioned truism that fear of death, when death is desired, only incites our insolence in regard to life.

THE KEY TO SELF-CONTROL

A well-lived life gives meaning to death, and in exchange, death gives renewed meaning to life.⁵⁸ Therefore, the constructive power behind the contemplation of death is only in force where there is an appreciation for life itself and for our lives in particular. Otherwise, there is no real shift in our mindset; we just slide along the spectrum to another shade of gray. Coupons have an expiration date to force action, but if we are not interested in the products, then the coupons are just as useless to us before the date as they are after the date.

Having purpose in our lives gives us perspective on life *and* on death. This is crucial because a pivotal factor in the ability to exercise self-control lies in how we manage our fears. *Terror management theory* explains that we deal with the fear of death and the resultant anxiety in one of two ways. When we are living a full and robust life, we tend to embrace our values and beliefs—that which brings meaning into our lives. This is known as the *mortality salience hypothesis* and promotes self-regulation. Alternatively, if we already have one foot in the Land of Escapism, we are inclined to pacify our fears by further indulging ourselves—in anything from chocolate to extravagant vacations—this is known as the *anxiety-buffer hypothesis*.⁵⁹ For this reason, stories on the news relating

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58. To foster the trait of humility, Ibn Pakudah (*Duties of the Heart*) instructs us to walk the mind slowly and methodically along the full journey of life, from the fertilization of the egg all the way through death and decay. This process is the very essence of perspective.

59. When we face a choice between small rewards and larger but delayed rewards, emotional distress causes us to shift toward the former. See Walter

to disaster and death make viewers respond more positively to advertisements for status products, such as luxury cars and designer clothes.⁶⁰

THE END OF DAYS

The prophet Daniel was told by God that in the end of days, information would be accessed at a dizzying pace: “Daniel, close up the words and seal the book until the time of the end; [when] many will run to and fro, and knowledge will increase.”⁶¹

The end is growing near. Buckminster Fuller’s “Knowledge Doubling Curve” shows that up until the 1900s, accumulated knowledge doubled every century. By the end of World War II, it was every 25 years. Estimates today suggest that knowledge doubles every 1 to 1.5 years, and the startling forecast by IBM is that in the next couple of years, it will double every 11 hours.⁶² Statistics like these highlight the phenomenon of an information explosion and its consequence—information overload.⁶³

The intensity of the times is further magnified by a world that is becoming chaotic and turbulent at a violent speed. This period

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Mischel, Ebbe B. Ebbesen, and Antonette Raskoff Zeiss, “Cognitive and Attentional Mechanisms in Delay of Gratification,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 21 (1972): 204–218.

60. See Naomi Mandel and S. J. Heine, “Terror Management and Marketing: He Who Dies with the Most Toys Wins,” *Advances in Consumer Research* 26 (1999): 527–532. After the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, there was a reported increase in overeating, drinking, and smoking. Equally notable was an increase in time spent with family and friends, as well as religious attendance. See Brooks Barnes and Andrea Petersen, “As Priorities Change, Some Question Why They Eschew the Fat,” *Wall Street Journal* October 5, 2001, A1, A4.

61. Daniel 12:4.

62. Buckminster R. Fuller, *Critical Path* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1981), 273.

63. Bernhard Jungwirth and Bertram C. Bruce, “Information Overload: Threat or Opportunity?” *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy* 45, no. 5 (2002).

in history and the coming events are ominously summed up by Rabbi Ezriel Tauber:

The state of suffering is a necessary condition of the coming Redemption. As the Maharal explains, a seed starts to sprout after rotting and breaking down totally. The “sprouting of the *Geulah* [Redemption] comes through the total breakdown of the whole world.” The Footsteps of the Messiah are not merely indicators; they are necessary conditions. When the frameworks of security, economy, society, and morality fall apart, when all falsehood collapses ... the light of Mashiach begins to sprout.⁶⁴

The veneer of civility and decency has been all but stripped away. Unspeakable atrocities fueled by global unrest and rampant depravity have put humanity into a moral tailspin.

As life becomes increasingly unpredictable and bizarre, a shrinking world compounds the prospect for emotional distress. *Terror management* is no longer confined to our own lives and experiences, but, thanks again to the technological age, our brains are forced to process a confounding degree of calamities and catastrophes—all of which become logged and lodged as a clear and present danger.

For example, in a given year, statisticians put the odds of being struck by lightning at 1,000,000 to 1. In a typical small town of 1,500 people, we can expect that there will be one such occurrence every 600 years—making it largely the stuff of folklore, at any time in human history up until the early eighteenth century. Yet with instant access to the world-at-large—photos, streaming video, live eyewitness accounts—our community now has 7 billion residents, and the likelihood of this occurrence is 7,000 times a day. As we

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64. Rabbi Ezriel Tauber, *Thoughts for a Jewish Heart* (New Jersey: Israel Bookshop Publications, 2006), 231.

become aware of the myriad mishaps and misfortunes happening all around us, our brains react as if we are experiencing them in real time.

The dry cough that turns out to be lung cancer for 1 in 3.5 million nonsmokers becomes the source of incessant worry because we “know so many people” who had such a diagnosis. We turn away from the statistically improbable in favor of fear, because of all the people “in our lives” whose stomach aches turned out to be a tumor, who were randomly attacked in broad daylight, or who became paralyzed from a mosquito bite. An endless onslaught of unpredictable and unavoidable horrors awaits us at every turn. It should not surprise us that neurotic has become the new normal.

THE EVIDENCE

The consequences speak for themselves. An estimated 67 percent of the population is overweight or obese. The result: cardiovascular disease, cancer, and diabetes account for nearly two of every three deaths in the United States alone.

Sales of antidepressant, antianxiety, and mood-stabilizing drugs are at record levels, and today, one in four Americans suffers from mental illness (and Americans are ten times as likely to suffer from depression today as they were in the 1960s, even accounting for increased awareness and diagnosis).⁶⁵

The coping mechanism for physical pain has been similarly compromised. In the United States, the number of prescriptions written for major painkillers rose 90 percent between 2003 and

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65. A 2011 study by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reports that the use of antidepressants has soared 400 percent since 1988. It is the fastest-growing class of prescribed drugs, second only to cholesterol medications. According to the World Health Organization, mental disorders are the leading cause of disability in the United States and Canada. See *The Global Burden of Disease: 2004 Update*, Table A2: Geneva, Switzerland: WHO, 2008.

2011.⁶⁶ In total, according to the *New England Journal of Medicine*, 116 million Americans suffer with persistent pain—an astounding 1 out of 3 people.⁶⁷ Our tolerance for reality—much less pain of any sort—is crippled.

Technology further pulls on the threads of our mental fibers because when we are most vulnerable—in a moment of intense anger or stress—the press of a button or a tap of a finger lowers the drawbridge to our castle of dignity. In years past, we had time to calm ourselves, to regain our senses. Not anymore. In an instant, the enemy—any number of vices—is within our walls, eating away at our self-respect. As we will discuss in the upcoming chapters, the first rule to curb temptation is to keep what is good for us close and simple to obtain and what is counterproductive out of the way and hard to reach. The reverse has become the insisted-on standard.

The world is no longer available to offer a reality check, to set us straight by ridicule or scorn. More and more, our desires are being repackaged as inalienable rights, with society quick to decry anything that impinges on its unchecked freedom.

This crystallizes the ever-critical necessity to know exactly what we are living for. Nothing other than a clearly defined purpose with meaningful growth will insulate us from the quakes of insanity that would otherwise shake our emotional foundation and force us to flee from reality.

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66. According to an Associated Press analysis of statistics from the Drug Enforcement Administration. Narcotic analgesics are prescribed for the relief of severe pain and are the third most prescribed class of medication, according to a national audit conducted by IMS Health, a medical data provider.

67. Philip A. Pizzo, M.D., and Noreen M. Clark, Ph.D., “Alleviating Suffering 101—Pain Relief in the United States,” *New England Journal of Medicine* 2012 366 (2012): 197–199. Persistent pain is defined as pain that lasts for weeks to years.

Our lives are filled with ever-vivid reminders of the true nature of this world. Snapped into heightened awareness, so much seems irrelevant—at least in the moment. Our soul wants to attach to the one true reality—where we find permanence and meaning.⁶⁸ Yet without a sense of purpose in our lives, we do not have the anchor of *bitachon*, and without this unspoken assurance, we shift to a mentality of “Let us eat and drink; for tomorrow we shall die.”⁶⁹ The Achilles heel of self-control—the foundational trigger of all susceptibility—lies in how we manage our fears. The antidote to fear is *bitachon*, trust in God.

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68. We read Ecclesiastes on Succos to remind us of the finite nature of this world, lest we get caught up in frivolity and unrestrained merriment.

69. Isaiah 22:12.

