

Facing the Unknown

A Patient's Guide
to Bitachon



A PRIORITY-1 PUBLICATION

FACING THE UNKNOWN: A Patient's Guide to *Bitachon*

Yesterday, you did not know what *Bitachon* was - or even how to pronounce it. Today, you are ready to stake your life on it, on the sure knowledge that G-d controls the world, and alters things for our benefit.

Bitachon -- what is it? And how do you achieve *Bitachon*?

Not Me.

They are joking, you tell yourself. They do not know what they are talking about. They cannot mean me.

Unfortunately, they do.

While doctors, wearing white lab coats and concerned

expressions, have been hovering around you for weeks, you lie on the bed and try to arrange your face. Calm repose. Plucky optimism. Jaunty, good humor. You even crack a few jokes, but no one laughs.

That is when you know it is serious. That is when you fall apart.

Finally, a doctor - older than the rest, speaking as the others nod silently - spells out your condition, and tells you of the number of days you have remaining.

No, he says sadly, there is no hope. They will try to make you as comfortable as they can.

The End Of The Road? Do Not Believe It!

You still do not believe it. Surrounded by the world's most advanced medical technology, and the finest specialists, there is little help – at least not by them. Worst of all, you find out that man's ability to help you is a lie.

Have you come to the end of the road? Perhaps not.

Because until now you have suffered from a common misconception, the false belief that man can cure any illness. Sadly, you know that is not true... now.

Bargaining And Recriminations Won't Work.

You start to ask, why me?

You search for reasons for what you have come to accept as a hopeless tragedy. But you find this is a false road as well. You are not even sure you really believe. You may

not be sure how much you believe in G-d, but you start to promise Him things you will do if you recover. But you know you would forget those promises if there were a chance you might get out of that bed.

But just hold on a minute. Do not find fault. And do not promise. Start by recognizing who can certainly effect your recovery – and then ask for some help.

It is as simple as that.

G-d Is The Only Help.

Now you have turned to where you should have gone in the first place. G-d, or more appropriately man's relationship with Him, has sustained hundreds of generations before you with the knowledge that He loves us endlessly.

Of course, you wonder how you can kindle a relationship which you have neglected for so long. And you ask what G-d can possibly do for you, given what the doctor said.

Be assured: G-d will not let you down. G-d can, and will help to the degree that we recognize and feel a trusting relationship with Him.

In fact, G-d is the only help.

Who Came First: G-d Or The Medical Profession?

Who are the doctors, and why are they saying all those terrible things about you?

G-d in His Torah, tells us that He brings sickness – and that He brings cures.

So who asked doctors to get into the act?

In looking at the Torah view of medicine, we see a paradox: if G-d wills that a person be ill, how can we take it upon ourselves to administer cures? Yet in the Torah, G-d grants permission to heal, by using the world around us as a means toward that end. So, aside from his state license, a doctor has a Torah license as well.

However, when it comes to predicting who is beyond help, the doctor is an unqualified judge. Although he may use probabilities, his experiences and other measures, he cannot pronounce fate. That is G-d's business. You know it as well as your doctor does: every day, hundreds of people recuperate – against the odds.

So face it: no one can tell you how much time is left. No one, except G-d.

The Power Of Prayer.

Yes, you say, but probability...

Before you say anything else, consider the Torah's story of Hezekiah, a king who became gravely ill. Hezekiah knew it, the people knew it – even the prophet Isaiah, speaking for G-d Himself, knew it: Hezekiah's days were numbered.

But Hezekiah refused to give up, even when the prognosis came from the Almighty Himself, Hezekiah continued to ask G-d for freedom from his illness. He offered no recriminations, no promises – just the complete knowledge that G-d alone is in charge, coupled with the sincere request that He grant more life.

G-d's immediate response was to grant Hezekiah a complete cure – plus 15 more years of life.

That is the power of prayer!

***Teshuvah* - Time to return to G-d.**

Don't you share in Hezkiah's request?

Consider the importance of the process of *Teshuvah*, as well. As hard as it might be to accept now, the Torah teaches us that illness is a message – a message to return to G-d. G-d is telling us – not that He wants to punish us for our faults – but that He wants us to recognize and overcome them by returning to Him.

He wants us to do *Teshuvah*.

Teshuvah is often translated as repentance, but it's more than that. *Teshuvah* is the recognition that G-d really is the Almighty, that He alone rules the world, that He alone brings illnesses, that He alone can heal us and that He alone will hear our request for forgiveness.

It may seem like a lot to say, but as Hezkiah showed us, there is no other viable path. Hezkiah recognized his shortcomings, felt remorse, and asked for help - through prayer. Then, probability or no probability, he was worthy of being healed.

Ask G-d for Help.

Torah tells us that we are never allowed to give up. That if your worst enemy holds a sword to your neck, you must always think that escape is possible – with G-d's help. In fact, even – or especially – given that situation, you are required to ask G-d for help. Because He alone can help.

Assuming all this is true, you say, can I actually ask for a miracle? Hezkiah is one thing. But I'm another. Will G-d actually reverse the laws of nature? For me?

He certainly can. But you must take *Teshuvah* a step further, through *Tefillah* to *Bitachon*, trust in G-d.

***Tefillah* Unlocks the Door.**

Fine, you say, but how do I get there? There must be some way to unlock the door, to help me express what I want.

There is, of course. The primary path to the astonishing power of *Bitachon* – is through *Tefillah*, prayer.

Tefillah is perhaps one of the greatest gifts G-d gave us: a way of speaking to Him. Moreover it is a natural means to achieve our goals. Indeed, Torah tells us we should take advantage of this special blessing.

While there is much in the *Siddur* (prayer book) of great importance, the central prayer is the *Amidah*, a series of 19 praises and requests.

The *Amidah* is structured into three parts. First, we praise G-d for what we know Him to be: the all-powerful, benevolent and compassionate Master of the universe. Second, we ask Him to resolve our difficulties and dilemmas. Third, we thank Him.

***Tefillah* Works.**

You may feel far from it now, but when you recite the *Amidah* with understanding – and feeling – your own belief in G-d's mastery over the world is strengthened. Because the very act of prayer itself deepens your realization that G-d is in total control – and even this realization merits that your prayers be answered.

The effect is cumulative. Your belief deepens every time you turn to G-d. Because the more you pray, the more you know that He is committed to your survival.

Tefillah, then, is your single most powerful tool in seeking a cure.

Certainly, you are wondering why things have been so hard, why your *Tefillah* must be spoken in utter desperation. You might think, as many do, that focusing on the great miracles of the past and praising G-d for them would inspire the necessary faith in Him. That would be fine, except that Torah teaches us that different prayers carry different weight at different times.

Sound confusing? Take the case of *Sora Imanu*, our great ancestor Sarah, the wife of Abraham. Unable to have children, she prayed for a child all her life – 30, 40, 50, 70 years, well past child-bearing age. Finally, at age 90, G-d gave her a son, Yitzchok (Isaac).

Well, you ask, weren't her prayers good enough at 40 – or 50 – or 70? Why did she have to wait all that time?

G-d desires the prayers of the righteous because they represent a deep relationship with Him, which is ultimately beneficial to man. If Sarah had been given a child at 70 not 90, her last 20 years of praise for having been given a child would not have resulted in the same closeness with G-d as her crying out in desperation over the same time. For Sarah, it was necessary that she spend the extra 20 years asking for G-d's help.

Not As Arbitrary As It Seems.

G-d has a different desire for each of us. Life's road is not an arbitrary one, although it may seem that way. Instead, ours is a personal life, designed for us to achieve our greatest potential – and closeness with G-d.

That's why you should turn to Him now.

You've already felt this. You've prayed before - everybody has, in times of need. Unfortunately, we tend to take for granted the gifts He gives us. So we're placed in

circumstances that cause us to turn back to Him, to establish the closeness that only comes through *Bitachon* and *Tefillah*.

We reach out to Him during times of need, feel His greatness, understand His kindness – and know He will answer our prayers. In *Tehillim*, King David says that during *Tefillah* we should look to G-d as all-powerful, and all-concerned with our good.

That way, the *Ba'al Tefillah* (possessor of prayer) will turn all his energies to G-d, reestablishing that closeness with Him, having Him shape our lives to our benefit.

No one knows that better than you do.

G-d Sees to it that You are not Helpless

The *Ibn Ezra*, a medieval Torah commentator, has written that a servant is incapable of independent action. Even if his life is endangered, he must wait for his master. That is absurd, you say, for surely the master would condone the servant saving his own life. Yet the *Ibn Ezra's* point is subtler than that: the servant is psychologically dependent on his master; he is incapable of moving without an order.

You stand before G-d utterly helpless, to the extent that, in the words that precede the *Amidah*, you must ask Him to “open my lips so my mouth will speak Your praise.”

And you know that it's the literal truth. You cannot even open your lips in prayer unless G-d helps. This is not only a realization about *Tefillah* – it is the essence of *Tefillah*. The great medieval commentator *Ramban* (Nachmanides) adds that *Tefillah* is only required according to the Torah, in times of crisis, when we feel truly helpless. According to him, the obligation at other times is of rabbinic nature.

When you are healthy and doing well, it is hard to feel dependent upon G-d. It is even harder to recognize that only He deserves our trust. Only in times of extreme distress are we able to give our undivided attention to prayer – and the role it plays in deepening our relationship with G-d.

***Bitachon* is More Than Faith.**

The result of *Tefillah* is *Emunah* (faith) - *Bitachon* is like *Emunah* in overdrive. *Bitachon* is absolute trust in G-d and His infinite power – including His kindness and mercy. And *Bitachon* is far more powerful than you might imagine – in terms of its ability to help us, in terms of what G-d will do for us.

Do not think you can have *Bitachon*? Think again.

The *Vilna Gaon*, the great Lithuanian Torah scholar who lived 200 years ago, described *Bitachon* as the feeling an infant has when it has just finished nursing. The baby knows no lacking whatsoever – its world is complete. It cannot even anticipate that it will ever be hungry again.

This is *Bitachon* – the certainty that G-d will take care of us. Not only will He solve all problems – but through heart-felt prayer, He will eventually erase the perception of problems altogether.

The Benefits Of Suffering

Great, you say, I'll buy it. Now, when do I check out of the hospital?

Not so fast.

A student once asked the *Ba'al Shem Tov*, the 18th-century founder of *Chasidus*, what it means “to

rejoice in suffering.” Instead of an answer, the young man was told to see a man who lived outside the city.

The student found the man living in abject poverty, a life of torment, pain and extraordinary suffering. He told the man that the *Ba'al Shem Tov* sent him and hesitantly asked his question: What does it mean “to rejoice in suffering”?

The man looked puzzled and said he was sorry, but that he could not answer because he had never experienced suffering.

We are capable of learning that there can be an uplifting aspect of suffering.

The Power Of *Bitachon*.

A story is told from the *Alshich Hakadosh* that shows that a person’s trust in G-d is in direct correlation to G-d’s will to grant him whatever he desires.

There was a Jew who had heard the *Alshich* saying that G-d sustains those who have perfect trust in Him to such an extent that they need do nothing. While he was not lazy, this man so believed the *Alshich* that he decided he would no longer work in his fields. Ignoring his justifiably shocked family, he sat all day reciting *Tehilim* (Psalms), King David’s supreme poetic expressions of faith.

Not needing to work any longer, the man sold his donkey to a neighboring peasant. Shortly after the peasant bought the donkey, he struck gold, mined it, and filled the donkey’s saddle bags with the treasure. Yet, as soon as the bags were filled, the peasant fell to his death. The donkey, having been

with his new master but a short time, returned to the Jewish farmer laden with gold.

When the family realized the great reward G-d had given the man in return for his *Bitachon*, they too knew the *Alshich* spoke the truth.

All Help in Proportion to *Bitachon*

The farmer's reward does not mean we do not have to work – or seek medical help. But we must realize all decisions are G-d's, and He helps us in direct proportion to our *Bitachon*.

And it happens to a remarkable degree.

One time, the *Rashash*, a great scholar of the 1800s, questioned the statement of Rabbi Yisroel Salanter, the 19th-century master of ethics, that even luxuries are granted through *Bitachon*. Rabbi Salanter said that he would prove it: from that moment he had *Bitachon* that he would receive a gold watch.

At the time, a ship was caught in a violent storm. The frightened captain vowed that should he survive and dock safely, he would give his gold watch to a rabbi in that port. A few days later, when the captain presented the watch to the shocked *Rashash*, he exclaimed, “this does not belong to me. Give it to Reb Yisroel Salanter. It is his.”

There Is Nothing G-d Can Not Resolve

And history shows that when Jews understood the Almighty's control of every aspect of existence, and

combined that knowledge with a deep appreciation of His loving kindness for His people, their difficulties were invariably resolved.

Because there is nothing that G-d cannot resolve. There is, instead, only the absolute security that He is in total control – and can do anything.

How To Get There

How can you develop such trust? First, you must recognize *Bitachon's* awesome power. You are in a unique position to do just that. Because you know that nothing else works.

Even the transitional state – the one you are in now – is beneficial. Because you are ready to move from confusion and doubt to the comfort and peace of mind of the *Ba'al Bitachon*, the truly fortunate person who has complete confidence in G-d. In itself, this serenity is extraordinary. But the power of *Bitachon* goes far beyond that.

***Bitachon* - It Must Be Complete**

On another occasion, a man in desperate need of 10,000 rubles came to Rabbi Salanter. When he told the man he need only buy a lottery ticket and have complete *Bitachon*, the man bought the ticket – and did not win.

When he complained to Reb Yisroel, he asked the man if he would have sold the ticket for 5,000 rubles. When the man answered yes, Reb Yisroel told him he did not have complete *Bitachon* – and did not merit his reward.

A Cure Is Possible.

When we turn to G-d, sincerely, with complete *Bitachon*, fully realizing that science and medicine are powerless without His direct intervention, He answers our prayers.

And as you lie in the hospital, a *Ba'al Bitachon*, you pray. You do not pray that your sickness never existed, because G-d does not reverse time. But you do pray for a cure. Even – or especially – because the doctors say it is impossible, you are steadfast in your *Bitachon*.

Because now you know a cure is possible.

What is that? You are a newcomer to *Bitachon* and you think you are not worthy of a miracle? Think again.

The Talmud says that with *Tefillah* it depends on who you are, and your motivation. Yet *Bitachon*, - built upon that absolute knowledge that G-d and only G-d is in control — does not depend on who you are, or the sincerity of your prayer. *Bitachon* will fulfill the wishes of even the most undeserving person (which is certainly not you). If he has absolute trust in G-d, even the most wicked person will be rewarded. And even if he does not have absolute trust, to whatever degree he places his trust in G-d, it is to that degree that he influences the outcome.

By *Bitachon* Alone

Rabbi Chaim Volozhin, founder of the yeshiva movement, said that if a person recognized that G-d controls everything, and there are no accidents, then he will be kept from harm. Further, even those who have been harmed – as you have been – are assured that G-d will help.

There are countless examples of how reliance on G-d works. Take the story of the two friends who were in

trouble. One, the head of a yeshiva, desperately needed a large sum of money – without it, his school was certain to close. The other had just been given the terrible news that his father was diagnosed to have a malignant tumor and had only a few months to live.

The only consolation each had was *Bitachon* – the kind Hillel had, who could walk into his city when a fire was raging and be certain that his house was unaffected.

The son of the sick man was suddenly inspired to give *Tzedakah* (charity) in the name of his father, and so donated the required sum to the yeshiva. Moments later, he received a call from one of his father's doctors, who told him they had read the X-ray incorrectly. What they thought was a tumor was really an irregularity present since birth. Your father, the doctor said, is fine.

Active Partners with G-d

Those two men had *Bitachon* – and then acted. Because for all its power, we are encouraged not to rely on *Bitachon* alone. Indeed, a person is expected to resolve a problem by his own effort – even while he understands that G-d is accomplishing everything. So even though you are praying for a miracle, you are not permitted to rely solely on a miracle. First, you have to do your best.

Confused? Don't be. For the central truth of Torah is that G-d created us to be His active partners. How much we do, and how much He accomplishes for us, is a complex equation. But in spite of the fact that He is the only one who actually accomplishes, we must play an active role.

Only then will our wishes be fulfilled.

You Are Never Alone

You have done all you can. And so have your doctors. Yet the power within you – of *Teshuvah*, *Tefillah*, *Bitachon* - is immense. Turn to it. Use it. Because you are never alone.

G-d can affect miracles.

And with His help, so can you.

Although we may hold miraculous power to avert an untimely death by the power of our *Bitachon*, it is easier said than done.

Most people, will have great difficulty reaching such a level of *Bitachon*, that they can truly feel beyond any doubt, that they will become well again.

Often times, even if a person would have that potential, the Almighty, would thwart his efforts, to have such *Bitachon*, because ultimately, He wants otherwise.

However, we must understand that to the degree that we do develop confidence in the Almighty's granting us a positive resolution, it is to that degree that we, in fact, help to improve our situation. So it certainly pays to try.