

Nothing Besides Hashem



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Dear Friend,

Before I begin, I want to thank you for an uplifting and unique experience. I returned home energized and inspired, as I hope you did. My family is very grateful to you and for that matter, your family, for the wonderful experience.

The following is a review of some of the thoughts we discussed that are pertinent to the basics of our daily existence. I suggest we review them regularly and I hope we can eventually make them available to others.

The basis of our existence is the realization of the concept “Ein Od Milvado.” There is nothing besides Him – Hashem is the ultimate Controller, Conductor, Facilitator and, of course, Creator and Owner of everything and every occurrence in existence, past, present and future.

I just received an email, which conveys this idea. Allow me to share it with you.

To: You
Date: Today
From: G-d – the Boss!
Subject: Yourself
Reference: Life!

This is G-d. Today I will be handling ALL of your problems for you. I do not need your help. So, have a nice day. I love you.
G-d

To internalize this concept, however, and to make it a constant awareness of our conscious minds and a deep-rooted ever-present feeling in our hearts, requires much ongoing effort.

Truth be told, since everything is decided and decreed by Hashem on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, if we were to do absolutely nothing the entire year, this lesson of “there is nothing beside Him” might be very effectively learned. However, such behavior would be inappropriate on many different grounds.

First of all, man would not have all of the opportunities to do good and the tests of his will to stay away from evil, if he did not have to put in all sorts of efforts to achieve his portion.

Secondly, man would undoubtedly pursue many more inappropriate paths and desires if he were not busy just trying to achieve the basics in his life (Perek Gimmel – Chovos Halevavos, Shaar Habitachon).

Besides, Hashem wants us to live in the natural world and not rely on miracles. It could be that when everything comes through obvious miracles, eventually we begin to take things for granted and might even begin forgetting the Source, from where these miracles come. When, however, we have to put in all sorts of efforts and subsequently discover Hashem's intervention, the ongoing suspense and struggle keep us more focused on Hashem as the ultimate source of all blessing.

It may be that a person can reach such heights of closeness and trust in Hashem, that he can stay safe from this danger just by maintaining the focus on his Bitachon. However, for most of us, we need the Hishtadlus to keep us focused on Him.

By the way, this need to stay focused on Him is one reason why often He takes a long time to answer our prayers, and thereby forces us to keep beseeching and begging Him over and over. The Medrash says that the reason the mothers of our people (Sarah, Rivka, Rochel, and even Leah) were childless for so long is that Hashem craves the prayers of the righteous. Obviously, He doesn't crave the prayers for His sake. He needs nothing. However, He craves

their prayers for the uplifting quality and effect that it has on them.

If I were designing the world, I might have thought that instead of Sarah praying until she was 90 years old to have a child, I would grant her the child at, say, 60, and let her say Hallel and thank Hashem for the additional 30 years.

The problem is that our words are far more heartfelt when they are desperate requests rather than words of praise. We say the whole Hallel the first week, then half the next, and after a while we tend to take everything for granted. Not so when the need is still acute.

When He puts off answering our prayers, He forces us to keep sincerely focused on Him, and this brings us closer and closer to Him.

Hashem seems so committed to this concept of our living in the natural world rather than the miraculous, that it seems from Chazal that all that He grants us on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur is only based on natural occurrences.

The Gemara in Shabbos 32a advises us not to rely on a miracle, because a miracle might not be forthcoming. Even though our lives and livelihood have been sealed on Yom Kippur, that

decision is predicated on natural circumstances. However, Hashem never guaranteed the decisions of Yom Kippur if they have to come about through miracles. Therefore, Chazal tell us not to count on miracles, even for results that were decreed on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.

The danger of forgetting that Hashem is the source of all blessing is so great, that according to the Sefer HaChinuch (Mitzva 430, Bircas Hamazon), the reason that Modim was instituted at the end of Shmoneh Esrei was to address this issue. It seems from the Chinuch that when we recite the various Brachos of Shmoneh Esrei, we become inspired that Hashem is the source of all blessing and begin to be reliant on Him and His kindness and graciousness. We find ourselves in danger of taking Him for granted and even as we rely totally on Him to grant our prayers, we are in danger of forgetting Him as the ultimate source of all blessing. We therefore recite Modim to remind ourselves and refocus on the idea that He, in fact, is the only source of all blessing.

An incident that took place over 25 years ago, also points out this concept. I once gave a Yeshiva bookkeeper a sign for her office, “Yeshuas Hashem K’heref Ayin.” The salvation from Hashem comes in a blink of an eye.

She once asked me, “Why is it that He only blinks at the very last minute?”

I answered that if He would blink a few days before the deadline or payroll, we might not realize that it is only from Him, and not because we are capable or competent. When, however, the salvation comes with a blink of the eye, at the last minute, we recognize clearly that it is only He that does it, and not ourselves or anything else.

Now that Hashem has designed the world to live with natural causes, not to rely on miracles, we must use Hishtadlus, our efforts, to achieve our goal. This, however, creates another problem. How can we protect ourselves from losing focus on the fact that despite all of our many, strenuous, and diligent efforts, it is really only Hashem that accomplishes, and we really cannot achieve anything through our efforts? How do we accept the fulfillment of His will that He wants us to live according to the natural laws, and still keep focused on Him constantly?

It would seem that we need an ongoing approach and constant stimuli to refocus on that reality that only Hashem, and nothing and no

one else, has any power over anything in our lives.

The following are some thoughts that can, when reviewed again and again and internalized in both our minds and our hearts, help achieve this desired effect.

We say in Hallel: “Please Hashem, save us; please Hashem, cause us to succeed.” The Seforno explains the phrase, “cause us to succeed,” as referring to being successful in doing the proper efforts. The question is, why doesn’t he rather interpret it to mean that our efforts should be crowned with success? The answer would seem to be that being crowned with success is included in the phrase “save us.” Efforts are not crowned with success, because they do nothing in the first place. Everything is completely and totally done by and from Hashem. We can only ask that we properly perform the Mitzva of Hishtadlus (effort), but we must know that effort has no connection with the result. It is just a Mitzva for us to perform, so as not rely on miracles.

It would be a good idea to recite this request at the end of Shmoneh Esrei daily (before stepping back) with this idea in mind.

The Ralbag says that Yaakov had to make every effort to get his son Yosef not to bury him in Egypt, even to the extent of making him swear to that effect. The reason he had to go so far, says the Ralbag, is so that his efforts should not be considered vain efforts (l'batalah). It seems that the results are not related to the efforts, as the Ralbag does not say that maybe the results won't happen, only that the efforts may be wasted.

Once again, we see that our efforts are necessary, but unrelated to the results. All results come directly from Hashem.

The Talumd (Niddah 70b) indicates that one who wishes for riches must engage in business as a condition of appropriate effort. However, the riches themselves are a gift from Hashem, not coming directly as a result of one's effort.

Another perspective of this concept can be seen in the Rambam at the beginning of the laws of Chanukah. The Rambam describes the pressure and pain suffered by the Jewish people "until the G-d of our fathers had mercy on them and saved them from the hands of their oppressors and delivered them." He then continues that the Hashmonaim killed the enemy and saved the Jews from its hand.

Who really did the saving, Hashem, or the Hashmonaim? The Rambam seems to contradict himself.

The obvious answer is that from the moment of Hashem's having mercy, they were really saved, the Hashmonaim just went through the motions and played out the script. However, for their efforts and dedication, they are also credited with the results, as if they actually were the ones who saved the Jews from their enemies.

The Mishna Berurah, at the beginning of Hilchos Megillah, brings a Rashi that explains why the Megillah is read at night and repeated by day. He says, "as a remembrance of the miracle, because they cried out in their days of trouble day and night." It seems to indicate that remembering the miracle has to do with their crying out day and night.

It would seem that the miracle is considered happening at the moments of their heartfelt prayers being heard, and the events of Purim are considered the playing out of the Divine decision, rather than the essence of the miracle.

We also find in the Mishna Berurah (Laws of Taanis Esther), that Taanis Esther reminds us that when a Jew fasts and does Teshuva with all

of his heart, Hashem sees and listens to him, in his time of need. We see that not only is everything up to Hashem and His mercy, but we all participate in the process by doing Teshuva. When we do so, then He is more ready to pay attention and have mercy on us. Even our Teshuva does not automatically remove an evil decree; we must then beseech Him for mercy as well.

Just a word about natural causes versus the miraculous: It seems from the Ralbag, when Yitzchak went to the Plishtim, he had to lie that Rivka was his sister, because he would have been relying on a miracle for them not to kill him and take her, had he said she was his wife. Yet it seems from this Ralbag that had Yitzchak not been afraid, he would not have had to lie. It seems that one's level of fear or confidence literally changes what is considered natural and what is considered miraculous. Had he not feared, then the Plishtim taking his wife or killing him would not have been the natural, and not lying would not have been considered relying on miracles.

Since all results are directly from Hashem, and the depths of our awareness of this principle and trust in his kindness are the greatest Zechus to bring about positive results, it would seem

worthwhile to find additional opportunities to strengthen these realizations, throughout our daily activities.

Two such opportunities can be found in Torah study and Tefillah. When we study Gemara, we are constantly searching for sources in the Written Torah for Halachos that were passed down from Sinai, through the Oral Tradition. Finding these Halachos, hinted at in the written word of Hashem, which was directly dictated to Moshe, connects us and our Halachic observance more directly and definitively to Hashem as the Source, thus strengthening our relationship with Him.

Our prayers are very powerful tools to strengthen our awareness of His total control, supervision, and direct involvement with every aspect of our existence. We constantly recite, “Baruch Atah Hashem.” When we say “Hashem”, we are calling Him by His first name, so to speak. We are referring to Him not in third person, but in second person familiarity. You are the Source of all blessing. His name defines His essence. Rashi (Parshas Va’arah, 6:3) tells us that in addition to Hashem referring to His status as Master of All and Master of Mercy, He is also referred to as the One who is trustworthy to deliver on His word. When we focus on Hashem

as Master of All – merciful and trustworthy to deliver on His word- what more do we need to be inspired to put our trust and reliance in Him?

When we say that He is the one who “opens the eyes of the blind” or “dresses the naked” or “unleashes the bound,” we realize that even though we are not blind, naked, and bound etc., if not for His graciousness, we would, in fact, be so.

We say in Nishmas, “Ad Heinah Azarunu Rachamecha...” The Vilna Gaon explains that when we realize the infinite kindness and mercy of Hashem that He bestows on us undeservedly, we come to rely on Him totally. Because, he continues, if what He has done for us in the past was because we deserved it, then maybe now I no longer deserve it. If however, it was pure underserved kindness and mercy, then Hashem, who never changes His essence, will always continue His kindness and mercy.

In Shmoneh Esrei we invoke the infinite merit of our ancestors. We also invoke the fact that in the name of Hashem, Kel, it refers to His overpowering, so to speak, His anger at our misdeeds in order to have abundant mercy on us. We also say that He is a king who helps, saves, and protects all according to the intensity,

confidence, and trust that we feel in Him. It makes no difference, says the Vilna Gaon, whether we put in effort (helper), do nothing (savior), or put ourselves in positive danger (protector). If we trust in Him, He will respond accordingly.

In Ya'aleh V'yavoh, we invoke our special relationship with Him, as expressed in the Atah Bechartanu, to ask Him to respond to our prayers (Avudraham). See an in-depth treatment of Shmoneh Esrei, as a source of Bitachon in "With All Your Heart – A Guide to More Heartfelt Prayer", published by Proirity-1.

Following is a list of assurances from Chazal to remind us that everything is up to Him.

There are certain things that Chazal promise us or assure us, of those we can most certainly be assured:

1. They tell us to give Maaser in order to be rich.
2. The Vilna Gaon and others say that this refers to 20% of one's profits, not just 10%.
3. They tell us that we may even test Hashem on this, because it is an absolute promise of performance.

4. It also seems from Chazal that even though this process may not be immediate, there is an immediate promise that if one gives Maaser, he will not be lacking at all.
5. They also tell us that the appropriate format of giving Maaser is directed to those who study and teach Torah.
6. Chazal also assure us that Hashem grants special protection and assistance, kindness and mercy to those who put their absolute trust in Him.
7. That goes to the extent of granting the desire of the person who is fully trusting that Hashem will not disappoint him in the fulfillment of his desire.
8. Reb Yisroel Salanter taught us that the absolute assurance of success in a given endeavor is only guaranteed to those whose Bitachon is 100% and unswerving.
9. Yet it seems clear that to the degree that one places trust in Hashem, it is to that degree that he increases his assurance of success in that particular endeavor.
10. We are also taught that one who gives Tzedaka on condition of results is considered a Tzaddik Gamur (complete) because his intention is to give Tzedaka under all circumstances, and the

condition is just something he would like in return.

11. We are also assured that Tefillah always accomplishes and is never turned away completely. Tefillah, however, must emanate sincerely from the heart, not just the lips.
12. We are also taught the dangers of relying on humans as opposed to Hashem. The consequence being that Hashem turns us over into the hands of the one that we rely on. This is a matter of degrees. To the degree that we rely on someone else, He removes His personal Hashgacha from us and allows us to be taken care of by that person.
13. We are also taught the danger of relying on our own Tefillos, or even those of another adult, because this can lead to the Satan raising the following issue in accusation: “This person is confident in his Tefillah, let us review his actions and see if he is truly deserving or not (most of us could do without such additional scrutiny).”
14. We are also taught the dangers of relying even on Bitachon. There is a fine line between relying on my own Bitachon, (confident state) and relying on Hashem’s

kindness and mercy, which is what Bitachon is really all about.

15. However, we are assured that when one has Bitachon, he is guaranteed results, despite his personal standing as a righteous or even a wicked person.
16. Chazal tell us that wealth truly depends on Divine mercy and as such, prayer and our efforts are only conditions that we must fulfill in order to receive the Divine blessing.

The above points are based on Chazal, and are therefore absolutely reliable.

I realize that this letter is tedious, but if we have gotten to this point in it, I suggest that we reread it again and again regularly to derive the Chizuk of “Ein Od Milvado” and Bitachon in Hashem.

With best wishes for continued success, and sincere appreciation.

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