

HOW MUCH HISHTADLUS?

Question

What does the Gemara mean that “Everything is in the hands of Heaven except the fear of Heaven” (*Berachos* 33b)? How much is really in our hands to do?

Answer

There are two currents of cause and effect in the world. One is what we call *hishtadlus*, that everything is the result of our own efforts. The second is *hashgachah*, i.e., the way Hashem conducts the affairs of mankind.

“Everything is in the hands of Heaven except the fear of Heaven” means that all material things are outside the control of man, because Hashem is conducting all the events of the world. And the only thing that seems to be left to man is his conscience, his *bechirah*, and in that realm, in the realm of his mind—more correctly stated, in the realm of his soul—he is in control.

Now, all this needs a good deal of explaining, which we will have to leave for some other time. But because the *ovdei Hashem*, all the pious people who follow the Torah, understand this principle—because they have learned that everything belongs to Hashem—they therefore are apt to make an error. It’s possible to make a mistake in understanding this principle, “Everything is in the hands of Heaven.” In order to realize what this is all about, we will quote the Rambam (*Hilchos Dei’os* 4:8).

In that chapter, the Rambam sets forth a system of behavior that is conducive to good health. He recommends certain modes of living and certain diets, and when he finishes the whole subject, he makes the following remarkable statement, a most unusual statement to find in any *sefer*:

“Anyone who conducts himself according to these ways that we have taught, I guarantee that he will never become sick all his life until he becomes very old, when he is about to die. He will never need a physician and his body will be whole and will remain completely well all of his days—unless he was born with certain weaknesses and defects, or unless he had spent part of his life in disregard of these rules before he began them, or unless an epidemic or a famine comes on the world.”

The Rambam has put himself out on a limb by saying he *guarantees* that if a person will obey these rules, he will never be ill all his days. It’s a remarkable statement, and the Rambam, I am certain, thought it over carefully before he wrote it. We

know that every statement in the Rambam—sometimes even a word of his—has been discussed by generations of great men. And here we have a statement of principle—not merely a detail but a major principle—being enunciated: A man’s happiness, which depends to a large extent on his health, is entirely in his own hands ... albeit with a few loopholes. Of course, loopholes are not insignificant, but outside of these loopholes the Rambam stands behind his guarantee.

If a man wishes to be well all of his life—and who does not—it’s up to him in most cases to make the choice. That puts a heavy burden on our shoulders. Until now we lived with a certain sense of freedom. It’s all up to Hashem, or mostly up to Him. If you’re a very pious person, you do not say “mostly.” It’s *all* up to Him, and that absolves you, it would seem, from a lot of responsibility. And now the Rambam puts the responsibility for your health on you; whatever happens, you’re the one who is responsible.

Now, while we are on this subject, we should be mindful of a second current that seems to flow independently of this: that Hashem is in charge of everything and all events that transpire are the result solely of His decree. We must reconcile these two different trends ...

Emunah and *bitachon* have their place, a very important place. There is no question about that. We should not lose sight of that for a moment. But at the same time, we should not make the terrible error of forgetting that whatever is our duty to do with our own hands ... we have to accomplish ...

It’s a very big mistake to throw everything upon Hashem and to utilize the principle of *emunah* and *bitachon* when in reality one has to pay attention to the other part, the *hishtadlus*. How much is a man responsible? In very many cases, illnesses are the result of a man’s own negligence, which means that a big part of the unhappiness of life is caused by his lack of foresight. It’s not in the materialistic sense (i.e., not a material cause-and-effect process), but rather because he neglected his duty as a servant of Hashem. The result is that he is punished for not fulfilling Hashem’s desire.

All the things that the Rambam states in *Hilchos Dei’os* are not mere advice. He is telling us *halachos* ... So when a man is unhappy in life, he has to realize that, to a big extent, it’s the sin that caused it.

When one goes to bed late and gets up in the morning weary, lacking energy, he is not prepared for the battle against germs. It’s a constant battle against bacteria. It’s only when your body is vigorous that it’s equal to the struggle. But if you present a weakened body to such a hostile world, then it’s a *cheit* and whatever happens is a punishment and your own fault. If someone runs

across the street against traffic, he has done a *cheit* and whatever happens is a punishment for him.

Now, that is a lot to swallow. People are reluctant to admit to this because it puts a great deal of responsibility on one's own shoulders. People prefer to have *emunah* and blame Hashem. But they should have *emunah* and blame themselves.

In *Bava Metzia* (107b), there is a long *sugya* that deals with the subject of the importance of eating breakfast. The Gemara enumerates all the benefits that come from *pas shacharis*, which illnesses and emotional upsets he can avoid by eating breakfast.

Suppose a *tzaddik* rushed out in the morning without breakfast and during the day he lost his equilibrium and became angry. He did not have enough energy to accomplish certain things and he did not feel well during the day. And, being a *tzaddik*, in each case he attributes all these things to Hashem and feels that he has exercised his righteousness as a *ma'amin*.

However, according to the *sugya* in *Bava Metzia*, it all stems from neglecting *pas shacharis*. He should have eaten a piece of bread in the morning ... A great deal of the unhappiness of life is a consequence of neglecting his duties to Hashem in caring for his health.

Similarly, in *Pirkei Avos* (1:17) we have a statement: "All my life I grew up among the Sages and I never found anything better for the body than silence." The Tanna did not say, "anything better for the soul," but rather "anything better for the body." That statement is placed there for a purpose; it puts a responsibility on us. A very big part of the troubles in life comes out of our own mouths. We don't begin to appreciate how many *tzaros* (misfortunes) originate from our own mouths—physical *tzaros*, illnesses. I'm not talking about mental illnesses now. [See p. 155, "More than they can handle?"] Now we are talking about physical illnesses ...

"My eyes became worn out because of anger" (*Tehillim* 6:8). Does anger ruin the eyes? Yes. Sometimes there is an onset of serious eye illness. Heart attacks also follow spells of temper. Very many people drop dead in a fit of anger. But all this is a result of talking!

There is no end to the list of maladies that result from talking. Therefore, "If a man can guard his mouth and his tongue, he is guarding himself against troubles" (*Mishlei* 21:23). Many people earned a punch in the nose because they opened their mouths—but that is too obvious. Many people lost their jobs because they opened their mouths. Many people lost their lives or lost their spouses because of what they said. The Tanna is telling us there is nothing in the world as good for your health as keeping your mouth closed. We don't realize that. We think there are a lot of other things in the world that cause illness—but the Tanna tells us that it's the chief of all factors.

Another illustration: finances. Money causes a lot of trouble in the world—a lot of worry. Now the Torah states, "There shall not be among you a poor man" (*Devarim* 15:4). The Gemara (*Taanis* 21a; *Bava Metzia* 30b) takes this as a statement that you should see to it that you don't become poor. The Gemara states

there that this *pasuk* means that you have to earn a living. "There shall not be among you a poor man" means that it's up to you to see that you're not in poverty.

Now, to materialists this is common sense. However, we are people of *bitachon* and *emunah*. In the language of *emunah*, if a man was wasteful of his property and/or extravagant and then came into need, it's not cause and effect. It's a consequence of transgressing: "There shall not be among you a poor man."

And now we finally come to the point. We see that there are so many fronts on which a man has to constantly exert himself. He has to guard his health constantly. He has to constantly be on guard regarding his personal relations with people. He should be careful not to talk, to not become angry. He has to guard his finances. Then, after doing all the things on his own behalf—after trying his best to be healthy, to live peacefully with people, to have *parnassah* ... after all these efforts he is expected to say to Hashem, "Everything comes from Your hand." As we say in the Shemoneh Esrei three times a day, "*Baruch Atah ... rofei cholei amo Yisrael*, You're the One Who keeps me well." And right after that we say, "You're the One Who gives me *parnassah*."

That is the great test to which everyone is subjected. The loyal Jew has two different tracks, and he has to constantly think about both and maintain his equilibrium.

But how do many people solve this problem? They do so by ignoring one or the other. They go about their business as if everything was in their own hands. They merely do lip service to the other principle. Or, in some rare cases, they trust in Hashem and don't do what is necessary for themselves.

But the *tzaddik* is expected to do both things and to do them perfectly and at the same time. One should not contradict the other or encroach on the province of the other ...

Life is not simple at all. We are constantly between two forces. We must always keep in mind that there is a responsibility upon us. Our happiness is in our hands. All our relationships—with our family, with society around us, with our employers, with our neighbors—are in our hands. Our health is in our hands.

At the same time, we have to understand that nothing is in our hands ...

It's remarkable how much of our happiness depends on us. If we don't overeat, the Metropolitan Insurance Company assures us that we will live longer. So don't say, "Oh, who listens to what they say? I have *emunah*."

If we are told, don't go out on dark streets at night, don't disregard the danger and say, "Hashem is everywhere." Even for a *mitzvah*, don't go out at night alone—whether it's in New York or Washington or any other of these bastions of righteousness.

It's a very important principle and we *ma'aminim* have to work on it no less than we work on other things. It seems like a *chiddush* to *ma'aminim*. But that is what Hashem wants.

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