

PASSIVE ACTION

by Rabbi Aron Tendler

The interplay between "Hashgacha - Divine supervision" and "Histadlus - individual effort" has been the topic of discussion and debate since the beginning of time. In the extreme, there are those who would like to believe that trust in Divine providence means that they do not have to make any individual effort. In some miraculous manner G-d will provide for them and their families. To the other extreme of the debate are those who do not believe in any form of Divine providence and rely only on their own efforts for support and sustenance.

Of course, if we accept certain (immutable) (axiomatic) principles there is a middle position that integrates both sides of the debate. 1. G-d is the creator and provider of all. 2. To activate G-d's largess we must work within the laws of nature and not wait for miracles.

This position assumes that G-d established and maintains a system of commerce and ecology that delivers the benefits of his largess and provides for all of creation. If we work within the system we will receive G-d's benevolent generosity. He will grant us health, wealth, shelter, and sustenance. If we ignore the framework of G-d's "delivery system" we will be shoeless, homeless, and hungry. Likewise, ignoring the ecological constraints of this world will destroy the richness of our natural resources and compromise our ability to extract G-d's gifts. Rivers and lakes will become polluted, the air will become poisonous, and we will inevitably suffer the consequences. The mere fact that we are good and righteous will not alter the negative consequences of our actions. We must work within the framework of both (immutable) principles.

How much each of us receives from G-d depends on so many variables that how G-d arrives at His decision remains in the realm of the Divine justice rendered from Rosh Hashana (Day of Judgment) to Rosh Hashana. Nevertheless, the degree of our "Histadlus - individual effort" is left up to our free will.

Part of the free will equation that determines the degree of our Hishtadlus in acquiring G-d's providence is our values and priorities. Some will decide that they need more material wealth even at the risk of not attaining their spiritual potential. Others will decide that they are content with less material gains and devote more energy and time to spiritual advancement. In either scenario, the material gains will have been determined the previous Rosh Hashana by G-d.

The focus of the book of Bereishis (Genesis) is different than the other four books. Sefer Bereishis is the only book that presents how the Jew interacted with the non-Jew. The other four books

describe the Jew's relationship with himself and G-d rather than describing their interaction with the other nations. It is true that in the other four books G-d forewarned us and admonished us against relating too closely with the other nations, but the main focus was still the nation's responsibility for itself.

As a nation, our mission is to become the kingdom of priests and a holy nation. Ultimately we must be the light onto the nations. I believe that in order for the Jewish people to accomplish their mission they must model for the rest of the world the integration of Hishtadlus and Hashgacha, individual effort and Divine supervision. I believe that the stories in Bereishis, especially the story of Yoseph, his brothers, and Yoseph's sale into slavery, highlight the integration of Hashgacha and Hishtadlus.

There are a few end-points I would like to begin with.

1. In the end of Parshas Vayichi, after returning from Yakov's burial, the Brothers confront Yoseph. Yoseph responds to them, (50:20-21) "Am I instead of G-d? You thought to do me evil but G-d made it good... I was sent ahead to sustain this great multitude of people."
2. At the beginning of Parshas Vayigash, after Yoseph reveals himself to the Brothers, Yoseph says to them, (45:4-5) "I am Yoseph who you sold to Egypt. Do not reproach yourselves, G-d sent me here to be a provider for the family."
3. In the beginning of this week's Parsha, Yoseph is brought before Pharaoh to interpret his dreams. Pharaoh recounts Yoseph's reputation as an interpreter of dreams and asks Yoseph to interpret his two dreams. Yoseph answers, (41:16) "That is beyond me. It is Who G-d will respond."
4. In last week's Parsha Yoseph was sold to Potiphar, Chamberlain of the Butchers. Potiphar noticed that Yoseph was uniquely gifted as an administrator. The verse states, (39:4) "And his master saw that G-d was with him. Everything Yoseph did was aided by G-d." How did Potiphar know anything about G-d? How did Potiphar know to associate Yoseph's administrative successes with G-d rather than with Yoseph alone?

Rashi referenced the Medresh Tanchumah (8) that states, "The name of heaven was familiar in his mouth." All of 17, exceedingly handsome, very personable, exceptionally effective, Yoseph found himself the center of attention. He was truly the proverbial "Golden Boy."

As far as Potiphar was concerned he had struck pay dirt. With Yoseph in charge, Potiphar was free to do anything else he wanted. Not only was he not concerned about maintaining his holdings, he was confident that under Yoseph's direction his estate would increase. Yet, whenever Yoseph reflected upon his own success, or if anyone else commented on his success, Yoseph would associate the success with G-d. Soon enough, the entire household had heard about Yoseph's monotheistic beliefs. Soon enough the entire household knew that Yoseph was different.

Yoseph's descent into slavery and his rise to power is the culminating example of the Jew in relation to the non-Jewish world. Therefore, it is important to know how Yoseph saw himself and how he

portrayed himself to the rest of the world.

It is clear from the above four end-notes that Yoseph saw himself as a servant of G-d. He saw himself as a chess piece on G-d's board of "creation and time" being moved from square to square. He understood that his destiny was not his own. He understood that he existed solely for the sake of G-d, the future of the Jewish People, and the redemption of the world. Yoseph understood that his prodigious knowledge, advanced wisdom, and unique success were all tools granted to him by G-d for the sole purpose of accomplishing G-d's intentions.

However, the Yoseph's gifts demanded of him tremendous effort and self-sacrifice. They were not simply granted to him in the manner of King Solomon awakening from a dream at the age of 12. Yoseph had spent the first 17 years of his life immersed in the tent of Yakov drinking thirstily from the fountains of Yakov's wisdom, vision, and faith. He felt empowered to join the ranks of his father, grandfather, and great grandfather as a "first born", leader, and protector. Yakov recognized Yoseph's uniqueness among the brothers and confirmed his tireless devotion and work with a multi-colored coat. Yoseph knew that he was destined by G-d for greatness.

Underlying Yoseph's greatness was the indispensable characteristic of humility. Yoseph knew that all his personal efforts and investments were to serve G-d and the Jewish People. Therefore, he had the courage to confront his brothers when he thought they were misbehaving or when he felt there was "national / familial" news of importance. Everything Yoseph did was "for the sake of heaven."

Therefore, as noted in the four endnotes above, Yoseph always responded by associating events, whether seemingly good or bad, with G-d and G-d's divine intentions.

Yoseph presents a complex example of the integration of Hishtadlus and Hashgacha. He appears to do whatever it takes to be successful while never forgetting that it is G-d Who is in charge. The one time he seems to slip is right before the incident with Potiphar's wife. Verse 39:6 states that Yoseph was "handsome of form and appearance." Rashi comments from the Tanchumah, "Once Yoseph saw his own rise to power in the household of Potiphar he began to eat, drink, and play with his hair." The Medresh seems to be saying that the young Yoseph was so overwhelmed by the events of his sale into slavery that he lost sight of who he was and what his mission was. Therefore, Yoseph was thrown into the turmoil and trauma of the incident with Potiphar's wife to force him to remember who and what he was. "The face of his father Yakov appeared before him." (Rashi 39:11)

Given the integration of Hishtadlus and Hashgacha that defined Yoseph's young life, why was Yoseph punished at the end of last week's Parsha by languishing in prison two extra years? (Rashi 40:23)

The question presumes that we are supposed to use the opportunities G-d grants us to better ourselves and advance our situation. In fact, it suggests that not doing so is wrong. To not maximize "G-d given opportunities" is to be foolish. If so, why was Yoseph punished for asking the Wine Steward to "remember him to Pharaoh?"

My Grandfather Zt'l in Darash Moshe (Vayeshev pg. 29) explained the uniqueness of Yoseph's situation and why he was not supposed to maximize the "G-d given opportunity."

Rav Moshe Zt'l explained that Yoseph should have waited for G-d to save him. He should have been passive rather than active in expressing trust in G-d.

"Of course, a person is supposed to make every effort possible (to help himself) and rely that G-d will help him. However, Yoseph should have understood that the entire episode of the Wine Steward and Baker occurred for his benefit in order that he should be saved. Therefore, Yoseph should not have asked the Wine Steward for help because the Wine Steward was destined to help Yoseph even if it were against the Wine Steward's will to do so. Instead, Yoseph treated the incident with the Wine Steward as a confluence of events directed by G-d to use in getting himself out of prison. Yoseph should have understood that it had all happened only for his sake and that he did not have to do anything except wait for G-d's salvation."

My Grandfather Zt'l further explained that Yoseph's misunderstanding suggested that the Wine Steward and the Baker had been punished with imprisonment because they had sinned. However, Yoseph knew that "evil people" are not punished in this world. G-d specifically punishes them in the World To Come and rewards them in this world. Therefore, even though the two servants were "evil" (the Baker for deliberately attempting to harm Pharaoh and the Wine Steward for only remembering Yoseph when it was for his own benefit) they would not have been imprisoned for their evilness. Instead, they were sent to prison only for Yoseph's benefit. Therefore, Yoseph should have done nothing. He should have remained passive and trusting in G-d's eventual redemption.

I would like to suggest that there are two types of belief and trust in G-d. One-type demands that we actively participate in the process - active Hishtadlus; and the other type demands that we do nothing except await G-d's revealed intervention - passive Hishtadlus.

In deciding whether to be active or passive in our Hishtadlus we must evaluate the circumstances of our lives from the perspective of two values. 1. What is G-d demanding of us in relation to our own lives? 2. What is G-d expecting of us in relation to our mission as "a light unto the nations."

Whatever the challenges and circumstances there is always the potential for 1. advancing our personal relationship with G-d and 2. the potential for others who observe us to learn about G-d and get closer to Him. Whether or not we should be passive or active in our Hishtadlus will be determined by these two values.

For the most part, we do not merit being on the level of passive Hishtadlus. A person on the level of passive Hishtadlus does not have to do anything except learn Torah and do Mitzvos. All other needs and concerns are G-d's business and He takes care of them. From the perspective of his own relationship with G-d, being passive, not doing anything in the manner of active Hishtadlus, proves, reinforces, and advances his belief and trust in G-d. Should he need to make any kind of active Hishtadlus it would indicate a lowering of his status and the need for introspection and repentance.

Two examples of this would be Adam and Chava in and out of Gan Eden and the giving of Maana during the 40 years in the desert. Adam and Chava started their lives on the level of passive Hishtadlus. They were not supposed to do anything except G-d's commandments. So long as they followed G-d's Mitzvos all their other needs and concerns were cared for. The moment they stepped away from being passive and assumed an active role in their own destinies they were expelled from Gan Eden and lowered to the level of active Hishtadlus. In so doing they distanced themselves from G-d on a personal level and in relation to the rest of creation they did not sanctify (advance) G-d's name. What greater proclamation of G-d's greatness could there have been than not doing anything except the will of G-d and G-d taking care of everything else?

We are told that in the desert the Manna indicated where people were up to in their personal relationship with G-d. If a person were truly righteous he would exist on the level of passive Hishtadlus. Rather than having to walk to the outskirts of the camp to gather his daily portion the Manna would fall outside the entrance of his tent. Minimal effort would be necessary to gather the Manna. If he fell from that exalted level he would have to function on the level of active Hishtadlus and travel further to gather his portion of Manna.

In understanding the example of the Manna keep in mind that the entire generation of the Exodus existed on a level of passive Hishtadlus unequaled in the annals of history. In the most undeniable fashion possible, everyone shared G-d's manifest protection, caring, and love. Therefore, the desert years and the Manna are a perfect example of how active and passive Hishtadlus exist on a continuum. The degree of our Emunah - belief and trust in G-d - determines the extent of our active or passive Hishtadlus. The greater our Emunah the more passive our efforts. The less our Emunah the more active our efforts.

It is not simple for a person to live on the level of passive Hishtadlus. To do so, a person's life must proclaim in action and word the existence of G-d. That means that the person's life is directed by the realization of G-d's absolute control of all things and as a result, the distinction between miracle and nature ceases to be. To such a person everything is equally natural and miraculous. (See Rav Dessler's essay on Hishtadlus and Miracles.) Such a person fulfills the verses in Ashrei, "G-d is near to all those who truthfully call out to Him. G-d does the will of those who are in awe of Him!"

The Jews at the time of the Exodus were growing to the level of passive Hishtadlus. For them the demarcation between miracle and nature had begun to blur. The year of the Ten Plagues, their last year in Egypt, had proven to them that their perception of what was real and natural was nothing more than the overt will of the Creator wielding absolute control over everything. However, the process required one last public "miracle" to fully remove the distinction between natural and miraculous. (Note that the only miracle of the Exodus from Egypt performed before the assembly of the entire Jewish people and the Egyptians was Kriyas Yam Suf - the parting of the sea.)

Kriyas Yam Suf was the miracle of miracles that finalized the nation's process toward the level of

passive Hishtadlus. Caught between the Egyptians and the Red Sea there was nowhere to run. Turning to Moshe they proclaimed the last vestiges of their active Hishtadlus. (Shemos 14:12-13) "Did we not tell you that we were better off serving Egypt than dying in the desert!" Moshe answered, "Fear not! Stand and see the salvation of G-d! G-d shall do battle while you do nothing (are silent)!"

The miracle of Kriyas Yam Suf is summed up by the Torah and repeated daily in our prayers, "And the nation trusted in G-d and in Moshe His servant." The Parting of the Seas was the moment when the Jews were catapulted to the level of passive Hishtadlus.

Yoseph Hatzadik was a true Tzadik (righteous person) and he existed on the level of passive Hishtadlus. He did not distinguish between nature and miracle. As explained earlier, he always proclaimed G-d's divine control over everything he was and did. Therefore, when the moment of redemption was upon him, when he found himself interpreting the dreams of the Wine Steward and the Baker, Yoseph should have known that he was to do nothing more. Instead, he slipped down to the level of active Hishtadlus and asked the Wine Steward for unnecessary help.

From the value of his personal relationship with G-d he had momentarily fallen. Undoubtedly, as time passed and the hoped for salvation did not materialize, Yoseph realized his "sin" and regained the level of passive Hishtadlus. Likewise, from the value of his mission as a "light onto the nations," he was not yet worthy of standing before Pharaoh as proof of G-d's absolute control and mastery. In the two extra years of imprisonment Yoseph's trust in G-d deepened to such a profound level that when he finally stood before Pharaoh (what I call the encounter between the Servant King and the King Servant) he was able to proclaim, (41:16) "I do not interpret dreams. It is G-d who will provide Pharaoh with an answer regarding his future."

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