

THE RECIPROCAL NATURE OF PERSONAL PROVIDENCE

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

Rabbi Frand on Parshas Chaye Sarah

*These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: Tape #348 Determining the Salary of the Shadchan.
Good Shabbos!*

The Reciprocal Nature of Personal Providence

When Avraham came to purchase a grave site from Efron the Chittite, for his wife, Sarah, the Torah says "Efron was sitting (yoshev - present tense) among the people of Ches" [Bereishis 23:10]. However, the verb 'yoshev' is written 'defectively' without the letter vov. It could thus be read as he (just) sat down (yoshav - past tense).

Rashi notes that the reason for this spelling is to teach us a hidden meaning. On this very day that Avraham came to negotiate with Efron, Efron had been appointed governor of the city council. He rose to power and began his reign, so to speak, on that very day. Why was this necessary? Rashi tells us, "because of the importance of Avraham, he arose to leadership."

Until that day, Efron was just another citizen of the town. It would be beneath Avraham's dignity to haggle over a piece of real estate with 'just any Joe'. Therefore, G-d interfered and had Efron appointed to a position of authority and power so that when Avraham came into town to purchase a burial plot, he would be dealing with the town's most respected citizen.

What is this Rashi really saying? Do we really think that Avraham Avinu - who just lost his wife -- gave a moment's thought to the status of the person with whom he would have to negotiate to purchase a burial plot? Does it make sense that G-d Himself should need to get involved in the local Chittite politics so that Avraham should not have to deal with a low level real estate broker? This was

the last thing in the world that Avraham was worried about at that moment!

And yet, we learn from Chazal that G-d did feel it was worth the 'effort' to intervene in the local election and bring Efron to power for the sake of Avraham's honor.

Rav Eliya Meir Bloch quotes from his father that we learn a very basic principle in the concept of personal Providence (hashgocha pratis) from this incident. Hashgocha pratis is a very difficult and a very misunderstood concept. Liberally translated, it means that G-d intervenes in the lives of people. It means that He is personally interested in my life and He will interfere on my behalf.

Most people only mention this idea when something 'big' happens in their lives. We often hear it mentioned regarding finding one's marriage partner. In this instance, it is quite common to hear people say "This was 'Hashgocha' [Providence]".

What does 'Hashgocha pratis' really mean? Is it 'Hashgocha pratis' if I find a parking space right next to the entrance of the supermarket? Or does Hashgocha pratis only apply to big things in life, like finding a job or finding a spouse? Is it reserved for such things as 'major illness', or are mosquito bites also 'Hashgocha pratis'?

The answer is that it all depends on the person. Our Sages tell us that Divine Providence is like a shadow. "The L-rd is your shadow upon your right hand" [Tehillim 121:5]. The relationship that He has with us is like that of a shadow. If I raise my hand, my shadow raises its hand. If I lift my foot, the shadow lifts its foot.

A person determines the amount of involvement that G-d will have in his life. If G-d is a major factor in my life then G-d WILL BECOME a major factor in my life, correspondingly. To the extent that my actions are determined by G-d and G-d plays a role in my life, to that extent, that which happens to me will be determined by G-d and I will play a role in His 'life', so to speak.

It is possible for G-d to be intimately engaged in every step of our lives -- even in the smallest details which are basically irrelevant to us -- if we have made G-d intimate in our own lives.

It did not make a difference if Avraham was at all perturbed whether he would be dealing with Efron the Governor or Efron the simple citizen. Avraham was on such a high spiritual level that G-d was 'personally' concerned with whom Avraham had to deal. Avraham was so intimately involved with G-d that G-d personally took care of even the minutia of this righteous person's life.

"Reward" versus "Merit": A Cryptic Baal HaTurim Analyzes Eliezer's Prayer

There is an interesting but difficult Baal HaTurim on the verse "And he said, "Hashem, G-d of my master Avraham, may You arrange it for me this day that You do kindness with my master Avraham (v'asay chessed im Adoni Avraham)" [Bereishis 24:12]. The Baal HaTurim states that the last letters of the last three words of the pasuk (im Adoni Avraham) spell 'mayim - mem yud mem' [water]. The

Baal HaTurim extrapolates into Eliezer's words "in reward for 'Please take a bit of water' [18:4] (where Avraham offered a bit of water to the Angels at the beginning of last week's parsha), please answer me by the water".

Eliezer made a deal with G-d. The deal was that the woman who would bring him water and also offer water to his camels would be the woman he would pick to be Yitzchak's wife. Eliezer prayed that G-d in fact give this sign as a reward for Avraham's offering water to the Angels (who he thought were common wayfarers).

The Baal HaTurim points out that if we do not only look at the last three words of the pasuk (im Adoni Avraham) but also at the previous four words (chessed im Adoni Avraham), the last letters of those four words spell 'domim' - daled mem yud mem [blood]. This alludes to a request by Eliezer that he be answered by virtue of the merit of the blood of the Akeidah [Binding of Yitzchak] in which Avraham was prepared to sacrifice his son Yitzchak to obey G-d's command.

The Sefer Kishutei Torah discusses this Baal HaTurim and raises the following powerful question: Eliezer had two 'merits' of Avraham to offer as justification that G-d should answer his prayers. One merit was the Binding of Yitzchak and the other merit was the fact that he offered water to guests. These, however, would seem to be totally incommensurate merits. Why even bring up the offering of water when the merit of the Akeidah is available? After all, on Rosh HaShanah, when we invoke the merit of the Akeidah, we do not mention the merit of the water offered to the Angels. In all our prayers, the merit of the 'Akeidah' is always our 'ace in the hole'. Yet, here Eliezer asks to be answered in merit of the water. The Akeida is almost like an afterthought. Why?

The Kishutei Torah notes that the Baal HaTurim chose his words carefully. Regarding mentioning the merit of offering the water, the Baal HaTurim says "b'schar" [in reward for]. Regarding mentioning the Akeida, the Baal HaTurim merely says "b'zechus" [in the merit of].

There is no question that in terms of 'zechus', in terms of acts of greatness, the 'Binding of Yitzchak' was a far more important act than that of offering water to the guests. But there is something about doing a chessed [kindness] for another human being that creates an indebtedness by the Master of the World. When we do favors for our fellow man, G-d 'owes us one', so to speak.

Fulfillment of commandments between man and G-d (such as Akeidas Yitzchak) is a great thing. It establishes merit. However it does not make G-d 'indebted' to us. The only thing that makes G-d indebted to us, as it were, is if we go out of our way to help another person. This creates an 'indebtedness' by G-d.

This is why the Baal HaTurim said, "in reward for" the offering of the bit of water. Eliezer was asking to be paid off. When we pray before G-d and ask to be "paid back" for our actions, the most effective "line of credit" we can present is not our fulfillment of commandments between man and G-d, but fulfillment of the commandments between man and man. The fact that Avraham put himself out and gave of his own for the benefit of someone else, creates -- as it were -- a debt by G-d such that

when the chips were down, Eliezer could pray to "cash in" that good deed and ask for "pay back".

Transcribed by David Twersky; Seattle, Washington.
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