

Kindly take a moment to study MISHNAS CHAYIM in the merit of
Leeba *bas* Avrohom A”H
a fellow Jew who passed away with no relatives to arrange Torah study on behalf of her *neshamah*.

The Age-Old Question

Last week, we discussed the obligation mentioned in the Mishnah in Berachos to view misfortune and success in the same light: “One blesses on the bad, just as he blesses on the good.” (*Berachos* 9:5) We also noted that the fulfillment of this ideal is no simple matter for most people. At the same time, the fact that it is not easy does not exempt us from striving for this level.

In fact, there is a well-known story which illustrates the earnest quest of one individual to comprehend and fulfill this very teaching of *Chazal*.

A Real Stumper

A disciple approached his *rebbe*, and asked him about the Mishnah in Berachos. “How is it humanly possible,” he wondered, “to reach such a level? How can a destitute person, on the verge of starvation and lacking the barest necessities of life, bless Hashem with the same degree of gratitude and happiness as a multi-millionaire whose luxurious house is laden with plenty?”

“That’s a very good question,” the *rebbe* answered him. “I’ll tell you the truth; I can not answer you properly. This issue has eluded me for many years as well.

“One thing I could tell you, though,” the *rebbe* continued. “In my town, there lives a certain pauper, who is actually a tremendous *tzaddik*. He doesn’t have a penny to his name; he goes around barefoot, and must sleep at night on the bare benches of the local *shul*. Despite this, he is constantly happy. I don’t know how he does it, but somehow, despite his abject poverty, he manages to serve Hashem with great joy, always praising and singing to Him.

“Obviously, this pauper has mastered the Mishnah in Berachos. If you want to know the true meaning of *Chazal*’s statement, and the way to fulfill it, search out this *tzaddik*, and ask *him*.”

And so the *talmid* went straight to the poor man with the radiant expression. The *talmid* posed the question to him: *How does one bless on bad fortune just as one blesses on good?*

The answer he received came as quite a surprise: “I’m terribly sorry,” explained the poor man. “I’m afraid that I, too, will be unable to help you. You see, I have no way of knowing what *Chazal* meant when they obligated one to bless on misfortune.

“For, how could I know? I have never experienced a bad day in my life! Hashem has showered me with only goodness; I don’t even know what misfortune looks like!”

It appears that this *tzaddik*'s key to success was his attitude. Instead of determining that his circumstances were 'bad', he saw them for what they truly were: acts of the Merciful One, precisely calculated for his ultimate benefit.

The Big Picture and Fatherly Love

A similar sentiment can be found in the Mishnah in Avos (4:14):

“R. Yanai said: The following issue is not ‘in our hands’: the peace of the wicked, nor the suffering of the righteous.”

Most commentators understand the Mishnah's statement as a type of acknowledgment of mortal man's finite scope of comprehension. Certain things are simply hidden (in this world) from an individual's intellectual reach, such as the age-old issue of ‘why bad things happen to good people’ and vice-versa.

The Chassid Ya'avetz in his commentary to Tehillim, however, takes a somewhat nuanced approach to R. Yannai's statement. While it is true that man's grasp is limited – and there are certain philosophical issues which are beyond his ability to comprehend – that is not the point of this Mishnah. R. Yannai means to highlight the fact that there is a common yet flawed attitude adopted by many people; they behold a particular situation, and assume that it is ‘good’ or ‘bad’. This is the aspect which is beyond a person's grasp: accurately identifying what is truly good or bad. Of course we can not properly explain why such and such happens to one person or the other; without seeing the full picture, we can't even determine if it's ‘good’ or ‘bad’!

How many people have become rich and famous, only to use their new-found wealth to buy a private jet, take flying lessons, and end up dying a premature, violent death when they crash their plane into the sea? Was their affluence for their benefit, or their detriment?

By the same token, who knows what untold suffering a person is spared when he does not acquire something he had set his heart on? He may be frustrated at the moment for missing the bus, for example, but when he later learns of the horrible accident that occurred, he realizes that his ‘misfortune’ helped him to stay alive.

Of course, in these illustrations, the underlying plan behind the events played itself out in relatively swift, clear terms. Even if the situation is not immediately clarified, however, *Chazal* instruct us not to be disheartened. At the right time, all will be revealed; but for now, we must try to put our faith in Hashem, and rest assured in the knowledge that everything He does is for our ultimate benefit.

Our *parshah* imparts this idea to us. “As a father chastises his son, so does Hashem chastise you.” (*Devarim* 8:5) A caring parent must at times act towards his child in a way that the child doesn't enjoy. Nor, at the time, does the child fully appreciate or understand why he is being treated in such a manner. One thing, however, is clear: the truly loving parent is acting for the

child's ultimate well-being. A child may not like or understand why he must be pricked by a painful, scary needle; but this vaccination may save his life.

The Chofetz Chaim (*Shem Olam*) reminds us: Hashem loves a person even more than that individual loves himself. As such, all that our Father in Heaven does – whether we initially perceive the benefit – is unquestionably in our best interest. As such, whatever He sends us is certainly worthy of blessing.