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The Avodah of Bitachon on Rosh Hashanah

In this shiur we will learn how the principles of *bitachon* discussed so far can help us approach Rosh Hashanah with *bitachon*.

The Yerushalmi (*Rosh Hashanah* 1:3) emphasizes the centrality of *bitachon* to our *avodah* on Rosh Hashanah.

Which nation is like this one? All over the world, a man who faces trial wears black clothes, wraps himself in black and leaves his beard unkempt, not knowing what the verdict will be. But the Jews are not like that. They wear white, wrap themselves in white and trim their beards. They eat, drink and rejoice because they know Hakadosh Baruch Hu will perform miracles for them.

Am Yisrael's behavior on Rosh Hashanah is that of one who has been exonerated in his trial. We are filled with *bitachon* that we will immediately be "written and sealed in the book of tzaddikim, for good life and peace."

Before Rosh Hashanah vs. On Rosh Hashanah

The *sefer Ohr Hameir* states, "After a person feels that *yiras Hashem* has moved him, his heart should be confident in Hashem, Whose way is to forgive wrongdoing. In fact, he should even rejoice in Hashem's kindness and not walk around depressed."

Along the same lines, the *sefer Yitav Lev (Parshas Shoftim)* wonders about a verse in *Selichos*, זוחלים ורועדים מיום בואך - *we tremble and quake because of the day of Your arrival* [Rosh Hashanah]. Doesn't that contradict the Yerushalmi's statement that we are confident that Hashem will judge us favorably? And he answers that the *piyyut* describes the state of our emotions in the period before Rosh Hashanah,

while the Yerushalmi speaks about our feelings on Rosh Hashanah itself. Before Rosh Hashanah, we tremble in fear because of the approaching *Yom HaDin*. On Rosh Hashanah itself, we have *bitachon* in Hashem and rely on Him to decree a favorable judgment.

In fact, logic dictates that we should work to strengthen our *bitachon* on Rosh Hashanah. As we have learned, by strengthening our *middah* of *bitachon* we fulfill the mitzvah of אֲנֹכִי הֵשֵׁם אֱלֹקֶיךָ. Could there be a better time than Rosh Hashanah to fulfill that primary mitzvah, which is the root of all other mitzvos?

Furthermore, whenever a person finds himself in a time of trouble, be it major or minor, he is supposed to focus on strengthening his *bitachon*. Certainly, on Rosh Hashanah, when a person trembles with fear of the imminent judgment, he must do everything possible to strengthen his *bitachon*.

Fear of Judgment – or Bitachon?

However, the Yerushalmi's directive to eat, drink and rejoice on Rosh Hashanah is difficult to reconcile with the lessons we learned throughout our youth. We were reminded again and again that on Rosh Hashanah the fear of judgment should wake us from our yearlong slumber. Aren't we meant to be terrified when we recite the description in *Unesaneh Tokef* of the *malachim* who panic and tremble with fear as they declare הֵנָּה יוֹם הַדִּין?

What's more, if we strengthen our *bitachon* and calm our fear of judgment – as the *Kedushas Levi* teaches us: when your Judge is also your Father, you trust that He will judge you favorably – won't that weaken the sense of urgency needed to truly repent and change, which is the primary *avodah* of these days?

Additionally, the Gemara (*Bava Kamma* 50a) seems to warn us against the confidence recommended by the Yerushalmi.

“R. Chanina said, ‘If one says that Hakadosh Baruch Hu is a *vatran*

(one who overlooks), his life will be overlooked. As the *pasuk* (Devarim 32:4) says, הַצּוֹר תְּמִים פָּעֵלוּ כִּי כָּל דְּרָכָיו מִשְׁפָּט – *all His ways are justice.*”

How then can anyone approach the judgment of Rosh Hashanah feeling that everything will be fine because the Judge is our Father?

Bitachon Review: Reliance on Other Factors

In order to answer these questions, we need to review some of the fundamentals of *bitachon*. Once we understand them clearly, the questions will dissipate.

In the introduction to *Shaar Habitachon*, the *Chovos HaLevavos* teaches us a foundational principle: there is no such thing as not having *bitachon* at all. Everyone trusts and relies on someone or something. If we didn't, fear would paralyze us and prevent us from getting out of bed or going to work. However, most people have *bitachon* in powers other than Hashem. As part of the *avodah* of *bitachon*, we must stop relying on anything but Hashem, Who cares for the world and all of its inhabitants with kindness and mercy.

Our pre-Rosh Hashanah introspection usually reveals that in the past year, our *bitachon* was not complete. We often combined our reliance on Hashem with reliance on our talent, intellect or connections. We tend to feel that since those powers served us well, there is no reason to fear that our successes won't continue in the upcoming year. **If those feelings form the basis of our sense of calm and confidence on Rosh Hashanah, we are far from the state of *bitachon* described by the Yerushalmi.**

Indeed, if we eavesdrop on our subconscious during Rosh Hashanah, we may hear some of the following:

“The situation is not as difficult or frightening as it's described. If you look around you see that most people who were judged last Rosh Hashanah had a pretty good year. They are still happy and healthy, and are joining me in shul once again. True, a few people suffered during this past year, and a few people are no longer with us, but that's

the way of the world. It's clear that people exaggerate the whole fear-of-judgment idea. Aren't we supposed to go by the majority? Every year, most people are inscribed for life, so why should I be different? Moreover, we have a concept of *chazakah*, the continuation of the status quo. If I'm here and doing well, I obviously made it through the judgment of Rosh Hashanah last year. Why should I worry that this year will be different?

"In fact, this past year was my most successful yet in terms of Torah and mitzvot. I improved in learning, davening and *gemilus chasadim*. I even did some mitzvot that were very difficult for me. I'm not saying that I'm a *tzaddik gamur*, but there's no reason I should be written down as a *rasha*. I should be able to relax.

"Besides, I'm not asking for so much in the next year. I just want things to continue more or less as they were last year. *Baruch Hashem*, I have a good family, good *parnassah* and good health. I don't need Hashem to turn the world upside down for me. It would be nice if I could get a bit of help with one thing or another. . . . But I'm not like a critically ill patient who's been told he has two weeks to live. He has to tear through the heavens with his *tefillah* and ask Hashem to override the systems of nature. *Baruch Hashem*, I'm healthy. All I need is for that to continue."

One who entertains such thoughts has neither *eimas hadin* nor *bitachon* in Hashem. He is "wearing white and eating and drinking," but it isn't due to *bitachon* in Hashem; rather, it is due to his reliance on factors other than Hashem.

Wake Up!

If we wish to strengthen our *bitachon* with regard to Rosh Hashanah, we need to begin by remembering that we must not calm ourselves with thoughts like these. We must internalize the reality that Rosh Hashanah is a day of judgment, and that our situation is far more perilous than we can fathom. If we learn the *pnimiyus* of Torah, such as the portions of the *Zohar Hakadosh* about Rosh Hashanah, we will

discover the power and extent of the forces that stand in prosecution and their ability to affect our lives and the lives of those close to us at this time.

We have previously quoted the *Me'or Einayim*, who explained that all the *shefa* we receive begins as a spiritual emanation from the highest source. It undergoes a process of constriction (*tzimtzum*) and materialization as it descends through multiple worlds, until eventually it appears in our world as a form of abundance that we can access. Since the *tzimtzum* is a manifestation of *din* and *gevurah*, the forces of prosecution stand up and try to impede the flow of *shefa* to its recipient. In order to receive *shefa*, we must defeat those *mekatregim*.

In the same vein, the *Maor VaShemesh (Parshas Nitzavim)* says that whenever new *shefa* attempts to materialize, the *mekatregim* immediately arise, claiming that the potential recipient isn't worthy.

That struggle goes on throughout the year. However, on Rosh Hashanah, when the entire world is created anew, **both the *shefa* and the opposition grow to an entirely different magnitude.** As the *Baal HaTanya* writes (*Iggeres Hakodesh* 14),

Every year, a new light that has never previously illuminated the world emanates from the *chachmah ila'ah* (higher *chachmah*). It descends and illuminates the *eretz ha'elyonah*. For on *erev* Rosh Hashanah the light of each previous year departs and returns to its source. . . With *tekias shofar* and the *tefillos*, a new light emanates . . . and all the higher and lower worlds receive their life-force from that new light.

We don't have the vocabulary to describe the *shefa* that is contained in that light. It carries billions of dollars' worth of sustenance for all living creatures (as Chazal taught us, *מזונותיו של אדם קצובין לו מראש השנה לראש השנה* – a person's sustenance is decreed from one Rosh Hashanah to the next). It also carries less tangible abundance, such as the light of *zivug*, which brings about all of the *shidduchim* in the coming year and has the ability to defeat the forces of separation (*pirud*). This illumination

is also the source of the light of Torah that enables a person to overcome the *yetzer hara* that grapples with him each day.

We can now understand why countless *mekatregim* raise their voices in protest on Rosh Hashanah, hoping to prevent that light from illuminating our world. This is the basis of the fear of judgment, the *eimas hadin* that is a central theme of our *avodah* on Rosh Hashanah. **This courtroom image is not a parable, but a very real description of what takes place on Rosh Hashanah.**

Someone who reassures himself by saying that “the situation isn’t so bad” is not living in reality. In truth, our situation is extremely perilous, and no one should treat it nonchalantly.

Life and Death, Blessing and Curse

As for those who rely on the status quo continuing (*chazakah*), or on the observation that most people seem to emerge from Rosh Hashanah unscathed – they need to review the second paragraph of *Krias Shema*. In **והיה אם שמוע the Torah clearly states that one who keeps Torah and mitzvos receives shefa, whereas one who transgresses the Torah does not.**

At first glance, however, life doesn’t often seem to reflect that system. Many people who don’t follow the Torah seem to enjoy greater success than others who are Torah-observant Jews.

The *Chovos HaLevavos* addressed this question in an earlier discussion. He explained that the world only appears that way in our limited perspective. If we could see the past and the future, we’d realize that in some cases people’s wealth is a curse rather than a blessing. In other cases, Hashem rewards unworthy people for their good deeds in this world, leaving them bereft of eternal reward in *Olam Haba*.

Rather than relying on our limited perspective, we should rely on the *pesukim* of the Torah that reveal the absolute truth. One who draws close to Hashem, the Source of all *shefa*, by keeping His mitzvos, is able

to receive *shefa*. Someone who distances himself from Hashem hampers his own ability to receive *shefa*.

As a Beggar at the Door

Those who assume that their Torah and mitzvos of the past year will guarantee continued success in the new year should know that the *sefarim hakedoshim* tell us that even though each mitzvah and each word of Torah dwarfs the entire universe, **we should not rely on our Torah learning and good deeds.**

The *Kedushas Levi* writes (on the *haftarah* of *Parshas Nitzavim*),

The request of someone who depends on his merits is limited, because the *shefa* he's requesting will be commensurate with his merits. This is not so in the case of one who requests help from Hashem because of Hashem's *chesed*. There is no limit to the benefit he can receive, because Hashem's *chesed* is limitless, and the gifts He can bestow are limitless.

Moreover, according to pure *din*, no human being fulfills his obligations to Hashem enough to ask for anything in return.

Finally, people who say, "I'm not asking Hashem to turn the world upside down; I just want things to continue as they are," are exhibiting flawed thinking. On Rosh Hashanah, the life and sustenance that will be allocated to each of us is entirely new. Everything starts from a blank slate. **Whatever we receive in the new year has nothing to do with anything we had until now.** We therefore cannot rely on our situation of the past year. We can't even ask for the situation to continue as is. That's a meaningless request.

Besides, a person who is honest with himself will admit that actually, he always hopes for even more in the upcoming year. He knows that his expenses will grow with the needs of his family. He's not just asking to be left alone; he wants a raise. When asking for that raise, he should stand before Hashem with shame and humility.

Nowhere to Turn

We have seen that none of the notions that people use to calm their fears of the *Yom HaDin* have any basis in reality. Rosh Hashanah resembles the time when Bnei Yisrael stood by the Yam Suf. We have nowhere to turn. There is danger in front of us, behind us, and in every direction we may turn. **That is the realization we are meant to reach over the course of Chodesh Elul.**

We want to enter Rosh Hashanah without any false pretenses to calm our fears. Then, realizing that there is nowhere to turn, we will bow our heads and say the words of *Selichos*. לא בחסד ולא במעשים באנו לפניך, לא אלא כדלים וכרשמים דפקנו דלתיך – *not with chesed and good deeds do we come before You; like destitute paupers we knock on Your doors.*

For some reason, they didn't write a *Selichah* that says, "Avinu Malkeinu, didn't You promise in Your Torah that if we keep Your Torah, You will give us an abundance of *brachah* and *parnassah*? Haven't I performed Your mitzvos? Even if I didn't keep them perfectly, I tried my best. Please fulfill Your promise and give me. . ."

Instead, we are instructed to say, "Hashem, we do not come before You with *chesed* or good deeds."

Because when we are pleading for our lives, our good deeds are irrelevant. **The only thing that matters is how completely we can be *mevatel* ourselves and seek refuge under the wings of the *Shechinah*.** Dovid Hamelech said (Tehillim 17:1), שְׁמֶרְנִי אֱ-לֹהֵי יְהוָה כִּי חָסִיתִי בָּהּ – *Protect me, Hashem, for I have sought refuge in You.* He understood that he had nowhere to run, and knew that only Hashem could protect him.

Similarly, in the *Selichos* for Erev Rosh Hashanah we say, חסות בצלך – *we have come to seek refuge in Your shadow.* We are fleeing from the *mekatregim* and seeking refuge under the wings of the *Shechinah*. No one but You, Hashem, can protect us from them.

Days of Humility, Escape and Refuge

The Rambam writes in his commentary on the Mishnah (*Rosh Hashanah* 4:7), “For these days (from Rosh Hashanah to Yom Kippur) are days of submissiveness (*hachma’ah*) and fear of Hashem . . . and escape and refuge with Him.”

A person reaches a state of *hachma’ah* when he comprehends his insignificance and the fact that his good deeds can’t help him. **He then flees and runs to Hashem for refuge.** In many places, Dovid Hamelech refers to Hashem as מְנוּסִי – *Whom I would run to for help* (Rashi, Shmuel II 22:3).

When we realize that we have nothing to rely on and no one to turn to but Hashem, we will be able to do *teshuvah*. **With this understanding we fulfill the mitzvah of אֲנֹכִי ה' אֱלֹהֵיךָ**, which in turn can lead us to change our ways and live entirely *l'shem Shamayim*. As the *Chovos HaLevavos* taught us, the mitzvah of אֲנֹכִי is the root of all other mitzvos. Accordingly, if we start with this mitzvah on Rosh Hashanah, it will inspire us to *teshuvah* in all other areas.

Different Thoughts – Different Actions

The sefer *Imrei Elinelech (Shabbos Teshuvah)* writes that when we say on Rosh Hashanah ותשובה ותפלה וצדקה מעבירין את רוע הגזירה, those three areas of *avodah* correspond to מחשבה, דיבור, ומעשה – thought, speech, and action. First, we need to internalize the recognition that no one but Hakadosh Baruch Hu can save us and that only by turning to Hashem will we be able to receive *shefa*. That understanding will lead us to seek refuge in Hashem’s protection. Which will bring us to express the Thirteen *Middos of Rachamim*. That, in turn, will lead us **to change our actions so that they reflect the transformation in our thoughts and our spoken words.**

During Elul, we often hear the recommendation that a person should accept just one *kabbalah* (commitment) for the new year, because a person who undertakes many commitments will usually quit when he finds himself unable to fulfill those commitments.

But the truth is that even those who undertake just one commitment often don't stick to it for very long. Too often it doesn't last past Yom Kippur or, at best, Hoshanah Rabbah. These *kabbalos* are so short-lived because the person undertaking them has not transformed his heart. He tries to apply his willpower to performing an action, or to stopping a negative behavior. But if we change our entire perspective, our actions will naturally change, and those changes will be long-lasting.

Words of Malchuyos

The Gemara in *Rosh Hashanah* (34b) explains the background of the *brachos* added in Mussaf of Rosh Hashanah. Hashem tells us, "Say before me *Malchuyos* in order to make Me your King."

He is asking us to remember that only He can save us and provide us with everything we need. It should be clear that Hakadosh Baruch Hu is not asking us to perform two separate forms of *avodah* - first doing *teshuvah*, and thereafter coronating Him as our King with songs and praise. Rather, our *teshuvah* should be intertwined with our declaration of Hashem's *Malchus*. **Our *teshuvah* results from our coronation of Hashem as King.** One who seeks refuge and protection under the wings of the *Shechinah* and declares שמע ישראל ה' אלוהינו ה' אחד will take care that each word he utters and each action he performs befits one who dwells in the palace of the King. Before getting angry at a person who hurt him, he will stop and think, "Do I really believe that if someone curses me it is Hashem who told him to curse, or have I forgotten that truth?"

The *Degel Machaneh Ephraim* explains this concept even more strongly in the name of his grandfather, the Baal Shem Tov, who said that Hakadosh Baruch Hu **intentionally** made Rosh Hashanah so frightening so that we will understand that our only option is to run to Him and daven to Him for our lives. **We will then truly accept His Kingship.**

This is similar to the concept we introduced before we began learning *Shaar Habitachon*: Hakadosh Baruch Hu brings *yissurim* upon a

person so that he will realize he has nowhere to turn and no way to escape his troubles. When he reaches that conclusion, **he will turn to Hakadosh Baruch Hu in *teshuvah*, and be healed of both his *yissurim* and his sins.**

Creating an Inseparable Bond

Sefarim teach us that the way we live on Rosh Hashanah is the way we will live throughout the year. Therefore, Hakadosh Baruch Hu brings us to a state of *yirah* on Rosh Hashanah, so that we coronate Him as our King. Then, throughout the year, we will continue to live as servants of the King, in His protection.

The *Maor VaShemesh* says,

Fortunate is one who is able to sanctify and purify himself and his thoughts and to prepare himself to approach Hashem throughout the 48 hours of Rosh Hashanah. By doing so, he will draw *kedushah* and *deveikus b'Hashem* for the entire year. . . That is why we must say *Malchuyos* on Rosh Hashanah with all our hearts. **For through this we will continue to coronate Hashem throughout the year,** and no divisive power will be able to separate us from our Creator.

Hakadosh Baruch Hu wants to benefit us and shower us with abundance from His treasuries. That is only possible if we seek refuge under the wings of the *Shechinah*. As long as we rely on other powers, we distance ourselves from Hashem and won't be able to receive that flow of *shefa*. Hashem therefore compels us, through the fear of judgment that we experience on Rosh Hashanah, to flee to Him and find refuge with Him, so that we will thus be sheltered in His refuge throughout the year as well.

With this perspective, a person is able to wear festive white clothes, eat, drink and rejoice on Rosh Hashanah. Since he knows that no one but Hakadosh Baruch Hu, his Father, can help him, he seeks refuge in His embrace, and **once he does that, he can be certain that he will be judged favorably.**

Different Worlds

We can now understand the difference between someone who has true *bitachon* that Hashem will judge him favorably, and someone who figures Hashem will overlook his wrongdoings. **The latter has not arrived at *bitachon* that is based on fear of Hashem.** He just immediately tells himself there's nothing to worry about. By doing so, he denies the basic Torah principle that one who is close to Hashem will receive *shefa* while one who distances himself from Hashem will not. When he denies the basics of Yiddishkeit, he distances himself from Hakadosh Baruch Hu. *Shefa* was in fact prepared for him, but by distancing himself, he forfeited that abundance.

On the other hand, a person who trembles with fear because he realizes that he is shamefully empty of Torah and good deeds, and who realizes how many *mekatregim* stand ready to steal even his very life, **runs to Hashem will the *emunah* that only Hashem can save him.** That *kirvas Elokim*, stemming from the recognition that he has no one to rely on but Hashem, fills him with incomparable joy and enables him to receive great *shefa*. For Hashem designed the world in a way that those who fulfill *ה' אלוֹקֵיךָ* will benefit from great *shefa* and lack nothing.

The Power of Tehillim

There is a custom of *chassidim* and *anshei maaseh* to say the entire *Sefer Tehillim* on Rosh Hashanah. Throughout Tehillim, Dovid Hamelech continually speaks about his realization that only Hashem can save him from the many difficulties he is facing. **Reciting those *pesukim* can help a person internalize that message**, so crucial to the *avodah* of Rosh Hashanah.

I was asked to explain the famous story about the Rebbe Reb Zusha of Anipoli.

Students of the Mezritcher Maggid once asked their Rebbe how Chazal expect us to make a *brachah* on *ra* just as we do on *tov*. The Maggid sent them to ask Reb Zusha, who lived in terrible poverty.

Reb Zusha told them, "I don't know how to answer your question, because I have never experienced *ra*."

The questioner asked me: "Was Reb Zusha on a higher *madreigah* than Dovid Hamelech? Throughout *Sefer Tehillim*, Dovid Hamelech complains to Hashem about his troubles."

The answer is that Dovid Hamelech detailed all his troubles in order to teach us that **if he hadn't found refuge in Hashem, his tzaros would have overwhelmed him**; he would have been unable to live at all. Since he declared (Tehillim 17:1) "שָׁמְרֵנִי אֱ-לֹהֵי חַסְדֵיךָ בָּהּ - *Watch over me Hashem, for I have sought refuge in You*," he didn't feel pain and sorrow. He was able to live with the *simchah* of one who sits peacefully in Gan Eden, basking in the glow of the *Shechinah*.

One who flees and seeks refuge in Hashem's protection will never be turned away. In *Bava Metzia* (85a) we find a story about Rabbeinu Hakadosh, R. Yehudah HaNasi. A calf was about to be slaughtered. It ran to R. Yehudah and tried to hide under his cloak. He told the calf, "Go, for this is why you were created." For this he was judged harshly in *Shamayim*. "Since he did not have mercy on the creations of Hakadosh Baruch Hu, he must endure suffering."

If this is true for an animal that ran away and sought refuge, how much more so when people run to seek refuge in Hashem's protection: He certainly won't send them away, but will protect and sustain them.

The Focus of Our Tefillah

One who approaches Rosh Hashanah with this understanding is assured of receiving *shefa* throughout the year.

As the *Kedushas Levi* tells us:

During the *Yamim Noraim*, the primary *bakashah* that a person asks of Hashem should be for Hashem to desire, in His goodness and kindness, to provide abundance to his nation Yisrael.

One should not approach the *tefillah* as one who is entitled because of his merits, but rather as one who is poor and impoverished. As Chazal said (*Rosh Hashanah* 16b) כל שנה שרשה בתחילתה מתעשרת בסופה – *every year that is impoverished in its beginning will be wealthy in its end*. The main focus should be to stand in the doorway as a poor man who has nothing, no merits, and no good deeds.

Even for Beginners

It's important to note that a person who is inspired to live this type of life is beloved to Hakadosh Baruch Hu, even if he has not yet changed his actions. This is because he is now living with the truth, and Hakadosh Baruch Hu loves someone who lives with the truth and connects to His Torah. Hashem will help him, as Chazal said (*Yoma* 38b), הבא ליטהר מסייעין לו – *one who comes to be purified will be helped*.

In Summary

There are two types of people who distance themselves from Hashem as Rosh Hashanah approaches. One is so petrified by fear that he can't even function. The other is not worried at all, and insists it's not as frightening as people imagine.

The *baal bitachon*, on the other hand, knows that the situation is perilous, and that countless opposing forces want to prevent him from receiving life and sustenance. However, he finds refuge under the wings of the *Shechinah* and trusts that Hashem will judge him favorably and inscribe him in the book of *tzaddikim*.

If we can learn to see the world through that lens of *bitachon* before Rosh Hashanah, by reviewing concepts of *bitachon* and saying *Tehillim*, we will approach Rosh Hashanah in the correct frame of mind. We will then benefit from the material and spiritual abundance promised to those who recognize their own helplessness and seek refuge in Hashem's protection.

כל שנה שרשה בתחילתה מתעשרת בסופה, אמן כן יהי רצון.



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