



June 22, 2024



Parshas Beha'alo'secha

16th of Sivan 5784

Visas, Cucumbers and the Goodness of Faith

Buried deep in the middle of the Shulchan Aruch (Judaism's code of law) is perhaps the absolute hardest law to properly fulfill. The halacha (Orach Chaim 222) states that one is obligated to bless Hashem for the bad that occurs in one's life with the same appreciation and love as one would bless Hashem for the good. The Shulchan Aruch is obliging us to thank Hashem for the tragedies and hardships that befall us with the same degree of affection and passion as one thanks Hashem for the good.

The question is, how is anyone other than those residing in psych wards able to properly pull this off? How is it expected of a woman who just had a miscarriage to look up to heaven and thank Hashem? How is it expected of a man who just broke his collar bone to thank Hashem the same way he would thank Hashem the night he married off his last child? Which part of our brain contains this ability? Which mental exercises could possibly train us to perform such herculean emotional feats?

And besides, weren't we told since we were young that we thank Hashem for the good and cry to Him about the bad? Why are we thanking Hashem for the bad? Isn't bad ... bad?

This parshah contains the answer.

There Is No Such Thing as Inherently Bad

The Jews, after wandering the desert for close to four decades, turned to Moshe and said "We are absolutely starving for some cucumbers, leeks and garlic." So intensely lusting for these foods, they began talking nostalgically of their life in Egypt. Which, if you think about it for a moment, borders on the insane! The

Egyptian bondage was one of the darkest moments in our long history, which contains many dark moments, and yet these Jews, with their apparent selective memory, longed for Egypt's juicy cucumbers and aromatic leeks and garlic! Almost unbelievable!

But aside for the ludicrousness these Jews were displaying with their deep nostalgia of the Egyptian culinary scene, they were also utterly wrong in their very desires. Rashi cites the Sifri, which writes that the mann (the miraculous food which rained down daily from heaven) had the extraordinary ability to taste like whatever the eater desired. All flavors were imbedded into the mann. All except five: leeks, melons, cucumbers, onions and garlic. Now, why would the mann turn into every flavor except these specific ones? The Sifri explains that these five flavors were detrimental to nursing mothers and could potentially hinder an infant's milk intake. Hence, Hashem extracted these five flavors from the mann in order to prevent the harm of innocent newborns.

So not only did the Jews complain, they were complaining about a perceived negative that was in actuality there completely for their own benefit.

This episode is a model for all seemingly troubling occurrences that befall all of us. The Torah is teaching us that there is no such thing as a "bad" occurrence from Hashem. Every single thing He does is good. "Bad" is merely goodness in a different form. It is goodness that we can't necessarily understand. Like a two-year-old who doesn't understand why he has to sleep every night in a box much resembling a jail, with bars that go up over his head, utterly unaware that the crib is there purely to protect him, so too all that befalls us is entirely for our best, whether we can understand it or not.

Hashem did not create the world in order to have servants working for Him. He does not need our prayers or servitude. Hashem is perfect with or without minions chanting his praises. Hashem created the world for one reason and one reason only: to give good to us. Much like a father and mother who would never dream of doing a single detrimental thing towards their child, so is Hashem towards us. Like parents who can

go their entire lifetime without knowingly doing a single act that was bad for their child, so too Hashem showers us with nothing but goodness.

A child may have looked at his parents with confused eyes as the doctor stuck a needle in his arm. He may have looked at his parents with sadness as the bus to camp pulled away, wondering why they sent him to this scary and lonely place. He may not have seen the good in what they were doing. But good it certainly was.

Food, Glorious Food

Hashem loves each and every one of us infinitely more than we love our own children. The perfection of the world is demonstrative of that.

Every single natural, God-made, edible food in the world is healthy and good for you. There is not a single natural, divinely created fruit, vegetable, bean, nut or grain which is meant for human consumption that is bad for you. Unlike donuts, Mike and Ikes or a can of red bull, fresh natural foods are almost by definition good for you. Why is that? Plain and simple; because Hashem made them. Hashem is in the business of dispensing good. Creating edible foods that are harmful to the body is the antithesis of His goal. Hence, the natural world is only filled with food that is beneficial to your body.

Or take the human body for example. There is not a bodily function that the human body goes through that is naturally and inherently painful. Other than childbirth, which the Torah explicitly says is painful as an atonement for the sin of Chava/Eve, there is not a single function our bodies perform that is painful. We breathe, sleep, digest, pump and filter blood. Millions of cells are splitting every second. Valves are opening and closing. Neurons are racing to and fro. Every single one of these processes is painless. A healthy and well-kept body runs seamlessly. Why? Because Hashem made it, and if He makes something it can only be good. That's the only thing He wants for us.

The Jews in the desert had three million reasons to thank Hashem for all the good in their lives, and yet they picked five tiny issues to harp on, pathetically unaware that even those five were for their benefit. We all make this mistake. Each and every one of us has five hundred thousand reasons to be grateful to Hashem,

and yet we often find ourselves harping on the three things in our lives that don't appear to our limited, puny, hugely restricted brains to be going the right way.

How refreshing it is to be reminded that not only are those things not bad, they are precisely what is going to give us even more, good.

The Torah is replete with examples of this. One example is that the Jews in Egypt were fishermen (Ramban 11, 5). Their diet and income heavily relied on fish. Can you imagine the pain they must have felt when the Nile turned to blood, killing all of the fish? Their business squashed. Their food source shriveled up. Where to go now?

Lo and behold, what happened a mere day later? The Egyptians, in desperate need of water, began buying water from the Jews at exorbitant prices. Precisely the source of the Jews' "agony" was in fact making them fabulously wealthy.

The Beneficial Burn

Another example: Little Moshe once found himself sitting on Pharaoh's lap. Under the suspicion of him turning into a rebellious son who would dethrone his adopted father, Pharaoh decided to perform a test to see if it was true. He placed the crown in front of Moshe as well as a glowing hot coal. If he reached for the crown, implying his desire to overtake the empire, he would be killed. If he reached for the coals, it meant he was merely a baby attracted to shiny, glistening objects. Moshe was about to reach for the crown, when a God-sent angel pushed his arm into the coals, instantly burning Moshe's hand and subsequently his mouth where he placed the coal, giving him a speech impediment that would last for the rest of his life. Would anyone think for a second that the burning coal was a good thing? And yet, precisely the item that was perceived as bad was the object saving Moshe's life.

In our lives too, there is only one thing. Goodness. Sometimes it comes in the form of health, happiness and birthday cakes. Other times it comes far more disguised. It may come as a fire that burns someone's house down. Seems bad. Perhaps it's a catalyst to free the occupants of their overattachment to

materialism, and force them to appreciate the less tangible things in life. Sometimes goodness comes in the form of losing a job. Perhaps that company will go bankrupt in a few months and Hashem is giving a prod to go somewhere else.

Hashem's actions have been established long ago as the ultimate dispenser of goodness to humanity. How hugely small minded to think that the issue we are dealing with He somehow forgot about.

Someone once debated with the Chavas Yair (Reb Yair Chaim Bacharach, one of the 17th century's most important rabbis) and asked him the following question.

"How could it be that all the segulos and mystical healing formulas found in the Gemara work, if they make no sense according to modern knowledge of medicine?"

The Chavas Yair looked at the man with a smile and replied, "The same person who can make a 300-foot oak tree come out of an acorn can make those segulos work."

Hashem runs the world with unfathomable wisdom and sophistication. How refreshing it is to remember that He is doing it all for our own good. We might not get it. But we know it's true.

The Passports

Reb Meilech Biderman relayed the following amazing story:

Reb Shlomo of Bobov, in an attempt to evade the Nazis, ran to take refuge in the city of Lemberg. Not long after he and his family arrived in the city, news spread that the Nazis were a frightening two days away. Scrambling desperately to save themselves, the Jews of the city reached out to all the ambassadors and begged them to grant visas. The only one that agreed was the ambassador to Costa Rica.

Anyone who brought a large enough sum of money to the office of the Costa Rican ambassador was granted a visa. Huge lines began forming outside his door. Reb Shlomo hurried to gather the money to purchase visas for his whole family. He finally got the money and ran as fast as he could go to the ambassador's house. While on line waiting nervously to get the visas, the door to the ambassador's house suddenly closed. A cold

voice rang out through the window. "The ambassador is no longer issuing visas. All those still standing on line should go home."

Horrified. Mortified. Shocked into disbelief, Reb Shlomo just stood there. He could almost smell the Nazis approaching. Where should he go? What should he do? He looked at the sack of money he had in his hand. Useless.

Was this his end?

Crushed, he began walking home.

Unable to face his poor wife and kids hoping to see him with the visas, he decided to stop off at a nearby shul. Delaying the inevitable, he sat down on a bench and picked up the nearest sefer. He looked up to heaven as he flipped to a random page and cried, "Hashem, I need chizuk, give me some divine inspiration."

The sefer he held was called Tiferes Uziel and it was a commentary on Tehillim. The very page he turned to was a quote from the Shelah (Yeshayahu Horovitz, a Polish Rabbi and Kabbalist who lived in the 1500's), which stated the following. When King Dovid said, "*V'ani tefilasi licha Hashem ... Anaini b'emes yish'echa*," he was telling Hashem that "if what I am asking for is good for me, then answer my prayers, and if what I want is in actuality bad for me, then don't." The Shelah explains that we don't actually know what is good for us. We can only guess. Dovid was turning to Hashem and saying that if what I want is good for me, then bestow it upon me. If what I want is actually bad, then don't give it to me.

Inspired, Reb Shlomo picked himself up and walked home. Less than one hour later, terror broke out. German troops rode into the center of town and got wind that there was an ambassador who wrote visas for the Jews. From a crack in the shutters Reb Shlomo was able to see the Nazis receiving the list of recipients of those visas. He then saw the Nazis begin combing the streets for those recipients. Horrified, Reb Shlomo looked on. While screaming to his wife to pack their stuff and get ready to run, he watched as all the people who were on line in front of him, mere hours prior, were gathered like cattle into the middle of the street.

He watched as the Nazis lit a fire. He watched as the Nazis stripped all the Jews of their clothing. He watched as the fire got bigger. He scanned the surrounding area and saw a place to escape to. A hole in a fence. A gap in the woods.

As those Jews were being led to their gruesome deaths, Reb Shlomo, the man who didn't get a visa, was escaping. By the time the Jews in the town square were gotten rid of and the Nazis turned their attention to the rest of the city, Reb Shlomo was long gone. The visa that he didn't get was his ticket to survival.

Live Every Hour

In Tehillim 90 it says that the average lifespan of man is 70 years. There are 24 hours in a day. Multiplied by 365 makes it 8,760 hours in a year. Multiply that by 70 years, and you get the golden number 61,300. You read that correctly, there are 61,300 hours in the lifespan of the average man. Coincidence? I think not. For Hashem and his Torah are hovering over every hour of every day, ensuring the quality of our life is at its highest.

Throughout the hardships of our lives, this seemingly difficult halacha in Shulchan Aruch has been our one and only consolation. We clutch close to the mantra of gam zu l'tova. We hold tight to the idea that no matter where and no matter when, Hashem is always giving goodness to us. We scream it out when we understand it the least. We look up and cry a piercing cry: "Gam zu l'tova." It's been our way of life for thousands of years. From the woman who is told by her obstetrician that her child has no heartbeat, to the fifty-year-old man who is told he has stage three lung cancer. From the parents who get a call that their child was kicked out of yeshiva to the doctor who tells the innocent young parents that their child has Down Syndrome. From the 27-year-old girl who hasn't gotten a date in three full years to the thirty-three-year-old boy who just got a no from his 300th girl. From the man who lost his life savings in a failed stock to the woman who is told the harrowing news that she has ALS. We look up to the sky, shedding a tear, and through gritted teeth we belt out "gam zu l'tova." We look back down, wipe away our tears and are overcome by calm. For we may not always understand it, but we are oh so sure that one way or another, our proclamation holds true.