

**Rabbi Elchonon Baron**

## How to Merit Divine Assistance

In *I Shmuel* 18:14 we are told that “David was *maskil* in all his ways, and Hashem was with him.” The commentators (Rashi, Radak, etc.) translate *maskil* as “successful,” and as such it echoes the idea expressed at the conclusion of the verse, “and Hashem was with him.” However, the word *maskil* comes from the root *sechel* which indicates “wisdom.” Why, then, should it be used in the sense of “successful” in this verse? Furthermore, if *maskil* is understood to mean “successful,” then the following words, “Hashem was with him” seem redundant.

It would seem preferable to render *maskil* as “acting wisely,” and to view the two halves of the verse as complementary, expressing cause and result. “David acted with wisdom” – and as a consequence of this, “Hashem was with him.” This interpretation is, in fact, found in the Malbim’s commentary.

Having established that “acting with wisdom” leads to God’s “being with” a person – a situation of divine assistance and guidance that we all aspire to – let us try to determine the nature of this “wisdom” and how to acquire it.

In the morning prayers, we recite the following two verses in succession: “Many are the thoughts in man’s heart, but the counsel of Hashem is what prevails” (*Mishlei* 19:21). “The counsel of Hashem stands forever; the thoughts of His heart for all generations” (*Tehillim* 33:11). What is the relationship between these verses, that they should be juxtaposed in this manner? Furthermore, it is interesting to note the

unusual expression “the thoughts of His heart,” an expression not used anywhere else in describing God’s ideas.

I once suggested an explanation for these two verses and the relationship between them. The reason the sages who authored this prayer placed these verses together is that they understood the words “the thoughts of his heart” to be applying not to *God’s* thoughts, but to *man’s*: “*Many are the thoughts in man’s heart, but the counsel of Hashem is what prevails; that being the case, if a person recognizes that the counsel of Hashem stands forever; and adjusts his own thoughts to correspond to God’s counsel, the thoughts of his own heart will then become fulfilled for all generations.*”

I heard from a Torah scholar by the name of Rav Hershkowitz (of Bnei Brak) (who in turn heard it from Rav Yosef Liss *zt”l*) that the late Rav Schach *hk”m* once raised a contradiction between two stories that are told about the *Chafetz Chaim zt”l*. The first one took place when his young daughter died suddenly, just before she was to be married. The *Chafetz Chaim* was overheard talking to himself (as he often did when he sought to inculcate a point of faith in his mind), saying, “I know that the *Satan* has come to distract me with this tragedy from my work on the *Mishnah Berurah*, but I am determined to resist his efforts and finish this important undertaking. I will not be deterred!”

The second story relates to the *Chafetz Chaim’s* aborted move to *Eretz Yisrael* in his later years. As is well known, the sage had a fervent desire to live in the Holy Land. He even went to the trouble of getting a passport from the Polish authorities and an “entry certificate” from the British, who governed *Eretz Yisrael* in those days. He arranged a dwelling for himself and shipped his meager possessions. At the last moment, however, his wife fell ill and was unable to travel. At that point the *Chafetz*

*Chaim* came to the conclusion that his departure being held up was a sign of divine displeasure, and he decided to abandon the plan altogether. He never broached the subject again.

The contradiction between the two stories is self-evident. In the first case, the *Chafetz Chaim* considered the hindrance that threatened to interrupt his project as “an act of Satan,” a test of his will to be resisted with all his strength. In the second incident, however, he immediately saw the obstacles to his trip as a reason to abandon his painstakingly prepared plans.

The terse explanation given by Rav Schach to explain the contradiction was, “One has to be a *Chafetz Chaim* to know what to decide!” This “explanation,” however, itself requires clarification. Did Rav Schach really mean that a person must reach the exalted level of wisdom and insight of the *Chafetz Chaim* – who most certainly possessed *ruach hakodesh* (divine inspiration) – in order to decide when it is God’s will to struggle against impediments, and when the time has come to give up?

With some thought, there appears to be a clear difference between the two incidents. In the case of the *Mishnah Berurah*, the *Chafetz Chaim* was certain beyond a doubt that this project was of utmost importance for the Jewish people. He therefore did not consider abandoning it. In the case of his plan to move to *Eretz Yisrael*, however, there were several weighty reservations that the *Chafetz Chaim* had considered with great seriousness before deciding in favor of the move. (It is well known, for instance, that Rav Chaim Ozer Grodzinski *zt”l*, the Rav of Vilna and one of the *Gedolei Hador*, was greatly opposed to the idea, and expended great effort to dissuade him.) Therefore, it is understandable that when difficulties began to present themselves, he might have viewed them as a sign from heaven to abandon his plans.

However, upon further contemplation and deeper analysis, we may be able to understand Rav Schach's cryptic answer as well.

The proper perspective on life's trials and tribulations is not to consider obstacles as indicators of God's will that we persevere or desist. Rather, we must view them as messages from Heaven to look deeply into our souls to determine honestly whether a specific course of action is in line with God's will, ignoring all personal considerations. God did not cast man into the chaos of this world without supplying him with the wherewithal to deal with the constant struggles and difficulties of life. The key to making correct decisions must therefore lie in man's heart. The trials and tribulations are just a "stop sign," indicating that it is time to stop and reflect upon one's actions.

In order to conduct this analysis for oneself, however, a person must be completely free of bias and partiality. An interested party cannot render an unprejudiced decision on any issue, let alone one that involves his own future. In order to remove such bias from one's heart, a person must first cleanse himself of all negative character traits, as described in the various *Musar* texts. Only then can one be capable of absolute impartiality.

Our father Abraham, who faced ten tests of his faith (*Pirkei Avos* 5:3), knew that he had to persevere and overcome those difficulties, as a result of his pure heart which led to a clear understanding of God's will. Bilaam, on the other hand, was unable to discern that his plan to curse the Jewish people stood in opposition to God's will, even after he encountered several fairly obvious indications. He was blinded by his personal interest, and as a result was incapable of impartial analysis.

Bearing this in mind, perhaps we can understand what Rav Schach meant when he said, "One has to be a *Chafetz Chaim* to know what to decide!" Only when

one cleanses his soul and perfects himself to the extent that he has removed all selfish considerations, as the *Chafetz Chaim* did, can he analyze the facts honestly enough to have a clear understanding of God's will.

Now we can better understand what the prophet says about King David as well: "David acted with wisdom in all his ways." He correctly evaluated all his plans and paths in life solely from the perspective of God's will, because he successfully subdued all personal considerations. He therefore merited that "God was with him," and was successful in all his endeavors.

If we contemplate the unfolding events in Eretz Yisrael since the outbreak of the present "intifada," we will find that during the first year, although there were a great number of terrorist attacks and attempted attacks, many of the attacks were averted, either through active intervention or through miraculous "good luck." Even those attacks that did succeed ל"ח, miraculously did not claim as high a price as in similar terrorist attacks elsewhere in the world. In the Beis Yisrael neighborhood – an area of many yeshivos and kollelim – and in Meah Shearim, we witnessed bombings and attempted bombings that had almost no ill affects at all. However, unfortunately, the terrorist attacks have begun to sow death and destruction on a great scale. Even in Beis Yisrael, at the exact site where residents had witnessed God's miraculous salvation a year earlier, a deadly bomb was successfully detonated. It is incumbent for us to contemplate this change of events, in order to understand what God expects from us.

Let us reflect upon how we reacted to the first, less intense period of the intifada, with its many miraculous "misses" and foiled attacks. Did we realise that God was warning us to search and mend our ways, to turn to him with all our hearts

and to pray for His mercy? Or did we mistakenly believe that the miraculous salvations were an indication that our ways were favorable to God, and that we should continue in them? Judging from the tragic, horrific developments that have taken place since then, it appears that we chose the second option, complacently interpreting God's message as one of approval and endorsement. Clearly, we have not succeeded in cleansing our hearts of personal bias, which leads us to the position that "I will continue to walk in my perfect path" (*Tehillim* 26:1). Therefore it was necessary that we be subjected to the terrible afflictions and sufferings that were subsequently meted out. We are being reminded, this time less subtly, that it is time to undergo extensive soul-searching and repentance, and not just rely on God to save us with His miracles.

May it be God's will that we "act with wisdom" and begin to relate to current events as "warning shots" from heaven. It is our duty now to stop and ponder our ways without any partiality or self-interest, to rectify our faults, and to return to God with a pure heart. Only through this will each of us merit to see "success in his ways" and Hashem's salvation, soon, in our days.