**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

**ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)**

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**Topics in Hashkafa**

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**Shiur #09: *Bitachon***

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This chapter will discuss the trait of *bitachon,* trust in God, which is a topic closely connected to our previous topic of *hashgacha pratit* (Divine Providence). Many verses throughout *Tanakh*, many of which are familiar to us from our prayers, command us to trust in God.[[1]](#footnote-1) The Vilna Gaon says that trust in God is the purpose of the entire Torah.[[2]](#footnote-2) The end goal of our Torah observance is to learn this trust in God.[[3]](#footnote-3)

What does it mean to trust in God? In the past few chapters, we have discussed the extent and nature of God's Divine Providence in our lives. One theory held that everything that happens is purely a function of Divine Providence. According to this theory, it is eminently logical that we should place our trust in God. Another theory held that God's Divine Providence is always with us, but works in consonance with *hishtadlut*, our human effort through the natural order. If this is true, then this should lead to the logical conclusion that if we do our part then we should trust in God to fulfill His side of the bargain. The first theory we saw, that of the Rambam and the Ramban, holds that God's Divine Providence only applies to an individual to the extent that that individual is worthy of it. In this case, at the very least, the worthy individuals should place their trust in God.

The question is, what does it mean to place one's trust in God? *Bitachon* seems to mean not simply the philosophical belief in God. That is called *emuna* and will be the subject of future chapters. *Bitachon* means not merely that we believe in the philosophical notion that God has x and y powers and uses them in fashions a and b, but that we trust in God to do something for us.

This is the difference between trust and belief. For example, we may believe that elephants are immensely powerful. We don't trust them to do our work for us every day. We might believe that Bill Gates is an amazing genius in business, but we don't trust him to make money for us because we have no personal relationship with him. Trust means that we expect someone to come through for us because of our personal relationship. The question is: what is the nature of this trust, and what exactly do we trust that God will do for us?

**Chazon Ish: Criticism of the Popular Understanding of *Bitachon***

The Chazon Ish has a famous (in some circles infamous) essay about this topic.[[4]](#footnote-4) He states that many people in his community have made a terrible mistake. This trait of trust, which is a cornerstone of piety and a wonderful trait from the perspective of Torah philosophy, has somehow morphed into the silly belief that people have, that any time we face a crossroads in life, we are supposed to believe that God will come through for us and the good result will ensue, and our hopes will be realized. Someone could be healed from a terrible illness or succumb; someone could keep his job or lose his job; something good could happen or something bad could happen. *Bitachon,* these people think, means believing that the good result will ensue. These foolish people even think, says the Chazon Ish, that, for example, if someone has cancer, and wonders whether he will live or die, or if someone doubts whether he will be able to meet his monthly expenses, this constitutes a lack of faith. These people, whom the Chazon Ish disagrees with, claim that *bitachon* means that one is certain (*batuach*) God will come through for him, and anyone who doesn't believe with certainty that God will come through for him is lacking in this trait of *bitachon*.

The greatest example of this mistaken or misunderstood *bitachon*(in the eyes of the Chazon Ish) is the Novardok school of *mussar,*which had its heyday between WWI and WWII in Europe. Rav Yosef Yozel Horwitz of Novardok, also known as the Alter of Novardok,[[5]](#footnote-5) explains that someone who has true *bitachon* feels the same in all circumstances. Whether he is safe at home or in the middle of a warzone with bullets whizzing by his head, he will feel strong in his *bitachon*. Someone with true faith in God knows that it is no more effort for God to protect one in the middle of a battlefield than it is for God to protect one when crossing the street on a regular morning. Whatever God wants, He can do. Therefore, someone with true *bitachon* feels that whatever he needs is guaranteed. He believes and trusts that God will come through for him and he will get whatever he wants at any time and in any place.

He tells the story of a pious person (whom his students believe is referring to himself, Rav Yosef Yozel being too humble to mention that) who planned to learn Torah at night but did not prepare a candle, and trusted that God would provide a candle. Suddenly there was a knock at the door, and someone (doubtless a heavenly visitor) handed him a candle and wordlessly left. Similarly, anyone who trusts in God wholeheartedly is guaranteed that his needs will be fulfilled. Rav Horwitz even goes so far as to guarantee that one who trusts in God will not be provided with only meager necessities but will be granted everything he needs to live comfortably in the lifestyle to which he is accustomed.

This version of *bitachon,* says the Chazon Ish, is a terrible mistake. It is a perversion of the truly sublime form of *bitachon* which forms the cornerstone of our service of God. In our previous discussion of theodicy, we noted that not everyone gets what they think they deserve from God. There are many different philosophical explanations for why a righteous person might suffer in this world and why God might not reward them in the fashion which we might expect. God runs the world in a complex fashion. He doesn't always do what we expect Him to. He does what He wants to do, for complex and hidden reasons which are not accessible to us.

Of course, *bitachon*cannot mean that we expect God will give us whatever we want. We have no right to say that we have faith that God will give us what we want, because maybe that is not God's will. God runs the world better than we would, so he certainly would not fulfill our will instead of His own. In addition, most of us are not *tzaddikim*, and so why should we have faith in God to fulfill our needs as if we deserve it? The Chazon Ish concludes that *bitachon* cannot mean that we trust God to give us what we want. If so, then what does *bitachon* mean?

**Position of the Chazon Ish**

There are three approaches to this issue amongst the classic Jewish philosophers. The Chazon Ish understands *bitachon*to mean not that God will do what we want, but rather that God will do what He wants. God will do not what we think is good in the here and now, but what He thinks is good for the world in the grand scheme of things, in some complex fashion. *Bitachon* does not mean that, for example, someone ill believes that he will recover, but rather that whatever happens is the will of God. He might recover, or he might succumb to his illness. A *botei’ach* believes that whatever happens is for the best in God's Divine plan, for reasons not necessarily accessible to human logic. A *botei’ach*does not have faith that he will be saved from suffering or trouble, but he is certain that whatever happens is because of Divine Providence and not happenstance. The believer is therefore no more nervous in a war zone than crossing the street on a random Tuesday morning, because either way he knows that he might live or he might die, and that whatever happens is a function of God’s will and not blind luck or fate.

A true *botei’ach* is always calm, according to the Chazon Ish. Whether he is in terrible danger or at peace, he knows that whatever happens is a result of God's will, as everything is the result of Divine Providence. This belief gives its holder psychological strength and courage. *Bitachon* does not mean that we are strong and steadfast because we know that God will save us. It means that we know that we are strong because we know that God could save us or not, based upon His own considerations of what is best for the world. The circumstances do not make it any more difficult for God to do whatever He wishes. He might save us if He wants to; and if not, we are confident that He has a good reason for not doing so. That is the psychological strength of someone who places his trust in God.

**Responses to the Chazon Ish**

This position of the Chazon Ish is philosophically very attractive: we trust in God to do what God considers best. Practically, however, this approach is very difficult. It might have appeal to the philosophically sophisticated, but it is not effective in convincing the masses that religion is a worthwhile endeavor. Perhaps for this reason, the Chazon Ish’s approach did not become as popular as the Novardok approach in the contemporary Jewish community. Some contemporary books[[6]](#footnote-6) tend to downplay this position of the Chazon Ish, claiming that he didn't really mean that success is not guaranteed to the *botei’ach*: either he only said this when he was young and later changed his mind, or he only wrote it for polemical purposes. HaRav Aharon Lichtenstein, however, insists that only with the approach of the Chazon Ish could one build a mature religious personality capable of meeting the challenges of the modern world.[[7]](#footnote-7)

**Rabbeinu Yona**

Rabbeinu Yonagives us two other definitions of *bitachon*.[[8]](#footnote-8) The first is that *bitachon*does in fact mean that we are certain that God will do what is good for us. He compares this trust to the trust a worker has in a king. He trusts completely that the king will pay his salary, and therefore works happily and diligently. Likewise, we fulfill the commandments with joy because we trust completely that God will reward us.

However, adds Rabbeinu Yona, we know that this reward is guaranteed only in the World to Come. We have faith that God will certainly reward the righteous, and even if God punishes us in this world, this is for our own benefit, so that we will attain eternal bliss in the next world. *Bitachon* means that we believe that God will give us the reward that we deserve. He might or might not do so in this world, but we are certain that He will do so in the afterlife.

A second aspect of *bitachon,* according to Rabbeinu Yona, is that while we cannot be sure that we will be rewarded in this world, we can hope that we will. This hope flows from the assurance we have that we will be rewarded in the next world. Since our hope that we will be rewarded in this world stems from our certainty that we will be rewarded in the next world, we can also call it *bitachon*since it emanates from that *bitachon*. A true *botei’ach* believes with certainty that God can provide salvation in this world as well, regardless of the circumstances, and hopes that he will be vouchsafed such salvation.

**Summary**

To summarize what we have seen so far, the Chazon Ish attacks the approach to *bitachon* which makes three assumptions: that we are (a) sure that God will give us (b) what we want (c) in this world. One of these assumptions must be mistaken. Ascertaining which assumption is incorrect gives rise to three possibilities, which are not mutually exclusive. The second approach of Rabbeinu Yona rejects the first assumption, stating that we are not certain; we simply hope and pray and look to God. The Chazon Ish challenges the second assumption, positing that God will do what is good for Him and for the world, and not necessarily what we think is good for us. Rabbeinu Yona's first interpretation rejects the third assumption, redirecting our confidence in reward to the World to Come.

**Prophecy**

We have thus far seen three approaches other than the Novardok approach to understanding the trait of *bitachon*. There is a fourth approach, mentioned by the Chazon Ish and others, claiming that there are circumstances where the simplistic approach to *bitachon*is warranted, and that is in a situation of prophecy. When a prophet tells us what will happen, then of course we are expected to have *bitachon* and believe that the prophecy will happen. The Chazon Ish even goes so far as to say that there might be *ruach ha-kodesh*, Divine Spirit, which is a bit short of prophecy, but can also cause someone to believe that God has communicated to him that his wishes or desires will be fulfilled. In lieu of that, however, we should not believe that God will necessarily give us what we believe we need in this world.

Rabbeinu Avraham ben Ha-Rambam cites these approaches as well.[[9]](#footnote-9) According to him, there are four levels of *bitachon*. The first level is to hope that God will give us what we want in this world, i.e. to put our hope in God (the second formulation of Rabbeinu Yona). The second level is to not only hope but to pray to God as well, believing that He can save us if He wants. The third level is someone who knows God will gives him what he wants, based on a specific prophecy. The fourth ultimate level is to stop wanting God to do what we want Him to do, but rather to accept that God runs the world, and that whatever He does is for the best.[[10]](#footnote-10) We do not worry, not because we know that we will get what we want, but because we know that God has a reason for everything He does. And though we may suffer, this is not a cause for worry because God only makes people suffer if He has a good reason for doing so. This last approach corresponds to the explanation of the Chazon Ish but pushes further in the direction of extreme stoicism.

We can now recast the Chazon Ish's criticism of the view of Rav Yozel of Novardok by means of a fourth assumption. The Novardok approach assumes that (a) we are sure that God will give us (b) what we want (c) in this world, (d) even though He hasn't told us so specifically by means of prophecy. The four alternatives are that (a) we hope and pray that God will grant our desires in this world, (b) we trust that God will do what He thinks is best in this world, (c) God will reward us in the next world, and (d) when God tells us the future via prophecy or divine inspiration, we trust that He will fulfill His promises.

**Defense of the Novardok Approach**

Let us return to the approach of Novardok. What is the logic behind this belief? How does it answer the argument that we are not all righteous, or that we know that sometimes the righteous suffer? In fact, the *Chovot Ha-levavot* brings several prerequisites for *bitachon*, the first being that we must try as hard as we can to be righteous.[[11]](#footnote-11) No one has the right to expect that God fulfill his wishes if he doesn't fulfill God’s commandments! Therefore, *bitachon* only applies to the truly righteous, to those who expend maximal effort in service of God.

Rabbeinu Yona, however, disagrees with this prerequisite of the *Chovot Ha-levavot*. In his commentary on *Mishlei,* he states that God is not only a judge but is also merciful. A true *botei’ach,* according to Rabbeinu Yona, hopes to be the recipient of God’s infinite mercy, even if he is undeserving. According to *Chovot Ha-Levavot,* then, the basis for our trust in Divine grace is merit, and according to Rabbeinu Yona it is also Divine mercy. Neither of these approaches, however, justifies the Novardok approach. Clearly, merit cannot be a basis for expecting God to give us what we want, because no one is perfectly righteous, and likewise Divine mercy cannot serve as the basis for being certain that God will grant his desires, because mercy is, by definition, not guaranteed.

A third approach, however, is quoted by the Chofetz Chaim in the name of the Vilna Gaon.[[12]](#footnote-12) The Vilna Gaon disagrees with limiting the right to *bitachon* to the righteous, as found in *Chovot Ha-levavot*. He quoted the verse in *Tehillim*[[13]](#footnote-13)which states: “The wicked suffer many ills, but he who trusts in God will be surrounded by grace.” While others interpret this verse as contrasting the wicked with the righteous who trust in God, the Chofetz Chaim explained that the verse does not mention righteousness. Rather, many ills befall the wicked, but if the wicked will trust in God, then he will receive grace, even in his wickedness. The Vilna Gaon explains that the basis of *bitachon* is the *bitachon* itself, as the power of *bitachon* alone is so great that it merits Divine grace regardless of the other spiritual accomplishments of the *botei’ach.* Likewise, explains Rav Yozel Horwitz, the mere act of *bitachon*, of placing all one’s trust in God and not in any other power, automatically causes one to transcend the influence of all negative powers and receive miraculous Divine grace.

Even though the righteous do sometimes suffer, this is because righteousness is not as powerful as *bitachon*. The righteous may occasionally suffer, but a true *botei’ach* will never suffer, as all his needs are guaranteed from Heaven. Given the power of *bitachon*, it is no wonder that the Vilna Gaon states that the main purpose of the Torah is to lead us to place our trust in God, which is the general principle underlying all the other commandments.[[14]](#footnote-14)

**Conclusion**

We have seen three justifications for one to trust in God to fulfill his needs and save him from harm. The first is based on his righteousness and the reward he justly deserves. The second is because he hopes that God will exercise His mercy. The third theory is that *bitachon* is so great that it earns its own reward, and one who has complete faith ipso facto deserves to have that faith realized.

Additionally, we've seen several definitions of what *bitachon* means. At one extreme, we have the Novardok belief: that God will always grant our desires in this world. Most agree with this approach only in the case of prophecy or Divine inspiration. If God has promised to reward us, then we should have confidence that the promise will be fulfilled.

Three alternative approaches are, first, the Chazon Ish, who defines *bitachon* as the belief that everything is done by God for a reason and is ultimately for the best, although it may not be what is best for us in the here and now. Second, according to Rabbeinu Yona, the real meaning of *bitachon* is that God will reward us in the next world. Third, Rabbeinu Avraham ben Ha-Rambam and Rabbeinu Yona explain that we may not be certain, but we hope and pray to God in our time of need, with confidence that He can always save us.

Integrating these definitions, we can define true *bitachon* as confidence that God exercises Providence in the world and that His salvation is always possible, deep faith in His infinite mercy, and the knowledge that whatever happens in this world, the righteous inherit the World to Come. This *bitachon* gives one the courage to fear only God, the strength to persevere in difficult times, and the power to transform any crisis into an opportunity for spiritual growth and coming closer to God. Although we do not have the audacity to dictate to God what he must do for us, we have faith that we are in God’s merciful hands and eternal hope that He will grace us with blessing and salvation.

1. For example, *Tehillim* 9:11, *Yeshayahu* 26:4. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Biur Ha-Gra* on *Mishlei* 22:19. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Not all Jewish thinkers emphasize the importance of *bitachon*. To the best of my knowledge, I have not found, for example, where the Rambam emphasizes the importance of *bitachon*. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *Emuna U-vitachon,* ch. 2 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *Madreigat Ha-adam,* pp. 185-187. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See, e.g., Rav Moshe Tzuriel, *Otzerot Ha-mussar,* pp. 325-329. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. *By His Light*, ch. 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Commentary to *Mishlei* 3:26. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. *Ha-maspik Le-ovedei Hashem,* pp. 103-105. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. See the commentary of Rabbeinu Bachya ben Asher to the beginning of *Parashat Miketz*, who posits eight levels of *bitachon* and explains the highest level in the same fashion as Rabbeinu Avraham ben Ha-Rambam. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Section 4 (*Sha’ar Ha-bitachon*), ch. 3 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. in a small pamphlet called *Nefutzot Yisrael*, ch. 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. *Tehillim* 32:10. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Commentary to *Mishlei* 22:19, 30:5 [↑](#footnote-ref-14)