

Bechukotai: A Holistic Model of Bittachon¹

I. Introduction

If there is an ineffable element of the religious experience, it is the aspect of *bittachon*. Less a concept and more an experience, it is, by its very nature, deeply individualized, with undeniably subjective elements, shaped by temperament, disposition, empirical reality, and personal experience. And yet, it seems possible, through the lens of sources, to describe a holistic understanding of bittachon, albeit with two different phases, into which many different individuals, indeed, different kinds of individuals, might find their place.

II. Agency

In his seminal essay assessing the blessings just before the *tokhakha*, Ramban notes that in a time of spiritual beatitude, when Jewish life is synonymous with abiding by the will of the Almighty, the role for human agency in addressing life challenges, most notably, medical pathology, will be minimal. Citing a litany of rabbinic sources, most prominently Chazal's assertion that humans do not have a natural role in healing, Ramban asserts that in this ideal existence, human pathophysiology will be driven solely by spiritual misconduct. As such, redress will naturally occur at the plane of prayer and repentance.

Admittedly, this represents an extreme, both circumstantially and ideologically. Ramban himself, in his introduction to VaYishalach, notes that Yaakov's binary model of agency and trust, with agency subdivided into diplomatic and military initiatives, establishes a norm for emulation. And yet, what is not addressed within this framework is the mentality that should accompany these preparations.

III. A First Stage of Bittachon

In a celebrated passage towards the end of Masekhet Brakhot, Chazal depict R. Akiva as an eternal optimist. Irrespective of compounding misfortune, R. Akiva would assert, *kol d'avid Rachmana l'tava avid*. R. Akiva's faith is justly rewarded: his rejection from lodging, and the subsequent loss, sequentially, of candle, hen, and donkey spared him from falling captive to brigands.

If R. Akiva's optimism is admirable, what is less certain is the extent to which it establishes an attitudinal norm with respect to misfortune. For this, one might be on firmer ground within the same Masechta, but towards the beginning, in which Chizkiyah summarily dismisses Yeshayahu and his bleak prophecy with the ironclad conviction that if, indeed, circumstances appear dire, one should never refrain from

¹ I am deeply indebted to Rav Aharon Lichtenstein, zt'l, who masterfully developed a dual mode of bittachon in his essay Bittachon: Trust in God. See here: <https://www.etzion.org.il/en/philosophy/great-thinkers/harav-aharon-lichtenstein/bittachon-trust-god>. Rav Lichtenstein's essay forms the point of departure for mine, with my suggestion of a unified, or holistic synthesis to the dialectic he proposes serving as what I hope is my contribution.

prayer, certain in the knowledge that salvation is not beyond Divine capacity, *aflu cherev chada munachat al tzavaro shel adam, al yimana atzmo min ha'rachamim*.

While there is overlap between Chizkiyah's doggedness and R. Akiva's optimism, a critical distinction, however subtle, remains. Chizkiyah never asserts his illness is indeed *tov*, good, but persists in his belief that his condition, by very definition, is reversible, should the Almighty will it. Defined as such, this seems more in line with a clear normative obligation: Ramba's understanding of the mitzvah of tamim tihyeh im Hashem elokheka means just this, fully believing that the Almighty alone has control over the events of this world.

Part of our national conviction that He is merciful and compassionate, *kel rachum v'chanun*, readily translates into a natural belief that He can be receptive to such forms of petition. To the extent that catastrophe looms by Divine decree, His compassion and mercy will compel at least a hearing before the sharp sword, cherev chada, literal and figurative, does its ghoulis work. In turn, the conviction that His intrinsic mercy not only gives us permission to pray in dire circumstances, but an obligation, according to Rambam, and, quite possibly, for Ramban as well.

Admittedly, there are outer boundaries to this presentation of bittachon as well. To cite one prominent example Ran asserts that it is appropriate to pray for the death of a terminally ill patient provided that the incurability of the disease is accompanied by human suffering. Such indeed were the actions of R. Yehuda HaNasi's maidservant, to ensure that he master could pass from the world without further anguish.

That being said, the fundamentals contours of bittachon remain those established by Chizkiyah. As a basic rule, where there is the breath of life, the Giver of Life may still be petitioned for compassion, and, however variegated the subjective experience of the petitioner, the underlying sentiment is assuredly in line with one of the meanings of R. Yehoshua b. Perachya's maxim, *al titya'esh min ha'puranut*. As a Jew is asked upon entering the celestial realm, 'did you hope for salvation', the implication that cultivating an attitude which takes this possibility with utter seriousness, not only nationally but individually, not only eschatologically but presently, is firmly established.

IV. A Second Stage of Bittachon

And yet, there appears to be a second stage of *bittachon*. After the dust has settled, and indeed He whose signature is truth has rendered his verdict, the obligations of bittachon shift. Here, too, one is obligated to bless the Almighty, *k'shem she'mevarchin al ha'tova kach mevarchin al ha'ra'ah*, acceptance of His will, indeed, wholeheartedly, according to Rashi, and even joyously, according to Rambam.

It is instructive that it is none other than the eternal optimist, R. Akiva himself, who achieved the apotheosis of this mode of trust. When there was no longer the possibility of salvation, in the earthly sense of

the term, there was still *kabbalat ol malkhut shamayim*, conferring one's entire being to Him with utter acceptance of His will, even if it involved *masrekot shel barzel*, and even if the ministering angels themselves could hardly abide it.

V. Synthesis

If the first stage of *bittachon* affirms Divine sovereignty by explicitly endorsing His redemptive power, the second stage is no less an affirmation of His sovereignty in the sense that His will has been done. As such, while *bittachon* may take on two distinct manifestations, it appears that the common denominator of this spiritual-halakhic virtue comprises unstinting belief in His mastery of the universe.

Indeed, while the transition between the two phases of *bittachon* may not be as seamless for us as they were for R. Akiva, there is great continuity between them. The quiet but rock solid conviction that He is not Creator but Director, not only *boreh* but *manhig*, inspires confidence in his powers of redemption even as it requires acceptance of His will, once revealed.

The awareness of this sovereignty has cognitive-intellectual facets, to be sure. And yet, at its root, it is an existential stance, whose affective dimensions are as momentous as they are inimitable.