

There is nothing **ELSE**

Cutting through the confusion
with a genuine, clear Torah perspective

BY ROBERT SUSSMAN



WE LIVE IN A TIME OF TREMENDOUS CONFUSION, where it can be exceedingly difficult for us to make sense of everything going on around us. The world has radically changed almost overnight. As a result, entire industries have disappeared and, along with them, thousands of jobs and careers. The economy lies in shambles. The future is uncertain. We blame our leaders. We blame our doctors. We blame our rabbis. We even blame each other. Or, we say things like, “Things like this happen from time to time,” “This too shall pass,” “It’s the nature of the world.”

The purpose of this article is to present a clear Torah perspective on our current

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reality and eliminate much of the confusion that exists on these matters. As is always the case when I write (unless very clearly stated otherwise), these ideas are not mine, but those of *Chazal* [our Sages] as presented by significant rabbinic authorities in our tradition. In this case, I have chosen to quote extensively and directly from a sefer published in July 2020 by Rabbi Yisroel Moshe Sorotzkin:

The *End Illuminated* and its sequel, published a few months later and to which he continues to add new chapters (the original is already in its fourth edition and seventh printing – and distributed by Israel Bookshop Publications). As one can see from what is quoted here and in the original seforim, all these concepts are based on words of *Chazal* and *Gedolim* [Torah giants] of previous generations.

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THE DOG BITES THE STICK

“One of the strongest lessons we were taught over these past months was *ein od milvado* – the recognition that there is no power other than Hashem. But to what degree do we believe and feel this truth? Have we fully internalised and practiced living with the heightened recognition of this reality?”

“The Mishnah [last mishnah in mesechta Sotah] tells us about the generation before Mashiach: ‘The face of the generation is like the face of the dog.’ Rav Itzele Volozhiner ztz”l brings this allegory to life when he describes a dog being hit by someone wielding a stick. The dog, with his limited understanding, reacts by biting on the stick, not comprehending that the cause of his suffering is really the man using the stick to hit him.

When we are threatened or hit, we have to raise our eyes upwards and see that it isn’t the ‘stick’ that’s hurting us; our pain is coming from a different place. We must acknowledge that government policies and what

occurs around us are not the causes of our suffering – and our reactions must reflect that truth.

Harav Elchonon Wasserman, in his monumental work entitled *Ikvesa D'Meshicha* [footfalls of Mashiach; referring to the period of history when Mashiach’s arrival becomes more tangible], brings this *pshat* [explanation] in reference to people who chose to blame what was transpiring in Europe [during WWII] on the *umos ha’olam* [the nations of the world] and specifically Hitler, ym”sh (may his name be blotted out). At that time, there were segments of Klal Yisrael [the Jewish People] attempting to fight the anti-Semitism with shows of physical strength and others who took to submitting articles in the non-Jewish newspapers decrying the racist discrimination and injustice.”

“Rav Elchonon explained that the dangerous threat that Hitler presented was only the façade; the real threat was a *kitrug* [an accusatory voice in the Heavenly court] that was obviously happening against Klal Yisrael in *Shamayim* [Heaven].

Hashem has many messengers, taught Rav Elchonon; therefore, putting effort into neutralising Hitler by killing him, for example, would be futile.” “[W]e have to realise that it’s all coming from Hashem and that the only way to rectify the situation is through Torah and *tefillah*.”

“Today, it is no different. The way that we discuss both the restrictive decisions that have been made for our communities and the people who seem to be making those decisions must reflect the *emunah* [belief in G-d] and *bitachon* [trust in G-d] that lie in our hearts. In fact, our reactions to the difficulties imposed upon us are at least as much a part of the *nisayon* [test] as the restrictions themselves.”

HASHEM IS BEHIND EVERYTHING THAT HAPPENS

“We read in the *tochachah* [the rebuke that takes place in the Chumash] ‘...And I will surely hide My face on that day.’ (Devarim 31:18) This *pasuk* [verse] is Hashem’s description of *galus* [exile].

...Hashem is telling us that not only will He hide Himself, but we won’t realise that we are suffering because He is hidden and that He is the cause for all our suffering. Rather, we will blame it on other causes and, therefore, have no way out of our problems, because we will not realise that the only One to turn to, and the only One Who can extricate us from our predicament, is Hashem – when we turn to Him and daven.

We often feel that things happen as a matter of course. Difficulties seem to be an inevitable part of life in this world. We refer to hurricanes, tsunamis, and floods as ‘natural disasters’. When there are frightening reports of terrorism, we dismiss them with the excuse of ‘the goyim hate us’. Those experiencing financial woes point to a litany of causes. And, as for the recent pandemic, people blame China, the WHO, the CDC, the politicians, the incompetence of our medical system – anybody and everybody – **but they don’t realise that the obvious answer is that Hashem is the One behind it all and it is to Him that we must turn for help.**

We know the truth, of course, but in *galus* it is difficult to maintain a pristine clarity [of the first of the Rambam’s Thirteen Principles of Faith] that Hashem ‘caused,

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causes, and always will cause everything that happens.' This loss of clarity is, in and of itself, part of the *tochachah* [the rebuke], part of the punishment that we endure in *galus*. We all try to say the *Ani Ma'amins* ["I believe" – the beginning of each of the Thirteen Principles of Faith] with sincerity. We know that it is Hashem who does everything; this is an intrinsic truth that we live with.

Rabbi Sorotzkin brings in the name of Harav Yerucham Levovitz, the *Mirr*er Mashgiach ztz"l, that **we are 'obligated to look at all occurrences in our lives as *osos* and *mofsim*, nothing less than "signs and wonders", and never as products of a natural system or random events."**

SEEING THINGS AS 'NATURAL' AND 'NORMAL'

"The midrash [Pirchei Heichalot Rabbati 36:1] gives a vivid description of how *Klal Yisrael* [the Jewish People], and the world around us, will look in the last year before Mashiach's arrival.

In the last year, terrible suffering and many harsh decrees, and the shibud [subjugation] will weigh more heavily, and many diseases; the world's nature will change and the taste of everything will be taken and everything will be expensive; there will be no peace to 'the one who goes out and the one who comes in', and the ba'alei amanah, the men of faith, will pass away – and immediately, Mashiach will come!

A few lines later, the midrash writes:

Why does the pasuk [verse] in Malachi say...that Mashiach "will come suddenly to his palace"? Klal Yisrael, in that generation, will say, 'Is it possible that we are seeing the world functioning as it always has, and yet the geulah [redemption] will come this year?' But they do not know that Mashiach will come suddenly.

The question is glaring. The midrash gives a frightening and detailed description of the period right before Mashiach. How can the same midrash say that at that time

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people will be saying that this is nature taking its normal course?

The answer is that no matter how terrible and strange things seem, Hashem always leaves room for one to view everything as 'natural' and 'normal'.

This does not only happen to people who are entrenched in a view that dismisses, or does not fully appreciate, Hashem's complete *hashgachah* [oversight; Divine providence] over everything that happens. **Even people who are sincere and firm in this belief can find themselves viewing events with more of an eye toward *teva* [natural causes] than toward Hashem.**

When the situation is terrifying and lives are in danger, it is easier to focus on Hashem, to draw close to Him in *tefillah* [prayer] and *teshuvah* [repentance]. But when a terribly difficult situation lightens somewhat and things become calmer, we forget the intensity of feeling that we had when things were at their worst. **At this time, many people are subject to thoughts like, "These things can happen from time to time."**

Hashem will always leave room for free choice. Although there can be drastic happenings, it is ultimately up to the individual to see past the surface and acknowledge that Hashem is communicating with us. He is speaking to us, crying out to us, begging us to wake up, improve, and prepare ourselves for Mashiach who is so near."

MIRAGES

"It is not enough to believe that Hashem has great input in things; we must know that Hashem is the total Source of everything.

Rav Mottel Pogromansky met an acquaintance after World War II and asked him how he was faring. The

friend said, 'Der Eibishter vet helfen – Hashem will help.'

Rav Mottel smiled and said, 'Hashem will not help you...'

Responding to the man's shocked look, Rav Mottel explained, 'Hashem will not help you. Hashem will do everything. We do not do anything on our own – "with Hashem's help". Hashem does it all.'

This is truly the *avodah* [service of Hashem] of our time – to come to the clear recognition and feeling that Hashem does...everything – *ein od milvado* [there is nothing besides Him]. There is no force in the world besides Hashem. Although all faithful Yidden believe this basic truth, the internalisation of it has many levels.

Offhand remarks are oftentimes a good barometer of our true level of recognition.

*A man was complaining to a friend about difficulties with *parnassah* [earning a livelihood].*

'Why not say the "Tefillah L'parnassah" [Prayer for Livelihood] that is printed in the siddur after davening?' suggested the friend.

*"Oy!" the man sighed. "Until now I was successful without the tefillah [prayer]. This is my tzarah [trouble] – I am at the point that I have to start davening for *parnassah*!"*

This man's comment bespeaks a sore lack in his *emunah* [faith in G-d]. He does not recognise that his *parnasah* has always come from Hashem. Whatever he thought came from his good ideas or his industriousness was really coming directly from Hashem all along. His friend's suggestion that he add a *tefillah* for his *parnassah* should have been greeted with assent, not dismissal.

It is tragic how easily we can fool ourselves. We think that we have *emunah*, but at the same time we feel that we are the ones who make things happen. We attribute success in so many areas of our lives to our intelligence, wealth, status, or other factors. But, in truth, anything that appears to be a source of success is only a mirage, a distraction from the truth."

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The struggle to attain real clarity of Hashem’s absolute control is the test of *Ikvesa d’Meshicha*. When we recognise that this is the challenge of our time, it sheds light on so much of what is going on around us.

...[T]here are many levels in the recognition of Hashem as the Source of everything. More than any textual quiz, the *manner* in which we approach the issues of the day, as well as the way we *perceive* and *react* to the effect of actions of other people, are perhaps more telling methods to gauge whether there is room for development in this area.”

EVERYTHING IS BY DESIGN

“The recent outbreak of COVID-19 was a global event that brought radical change to our lives. But many of us have ‘had enough’. We are just waiting for things to ‘go back to normal’. But the truth is, if we think that the way things were was ‘normal’, that means, *chas v’shalom* [G-d forbid], that we have not yet absorbed the message of COVID-19 sufficiently.

We need to consider – were our lives really ‘normal’ before? Can living without the *Beis Hamikdash* [Temple] be called normal? Hashem has reminded us through COVID-19 that ours is a temporary reality. *Galus* should never be considered normal.

Hashem talks to us through the events happening around us. He makes no mistakes; every detail is part of His Master Plan. Each component of the

COVID-19 situation – from the global ramifications to communal disruptions to individual inconveniences – was part of the design. The pandemic presented us with a chance to see things in a way that perhaps we hadn’t before.

Hashem is using various means to cause us to feel very uncomfortable, like we are being backed into a corner in so many ways. The purpose of this is to push us to do *teshuvah* [repent] and draw closer to Hashem by begging for the *geulah* [redemption].

The COVID-19 crisis entailed everyone ‘sheltering’ at home. For weeks on end, we were not allowed to enter our offices and stores and, much more importantly, our shuls, schools and yeshivos – our places of *tefillah* and Torah study. Hashem could have sent COVID-19 without this unusual aspect, so the fact that He did include it must mean that it had a specific and necessary purpose.

In *Mitzrayim* [Egypt], during *Makkas Bechoros* [the death of the firstborn], we were not allowed out of our homes. The *Baal Haturim* writes that before the final *geulah* we will face a similar situation.

The *pasuk* [verse] in the *navi* Yeshayah [prophet Isaiah] (26:20) speaks about the period before Mashiach: ‘Go, My nation, into your rooms and close your doors; hide but a moment until the storm of anger passes.’

We see that the *Torah Hakedoshah* [Holy Torah] foretold that prior to Mashiach’s arrival, we will have to be indoors. What is

the benefit of spending time inside before Mashiach comes?

The *midrashim* and *meforshim* [commentaries] on the above *pasuk* [verse] in Yeshayah explain that the purpose of going inside at this time is to think – to undergo a contemplative process of self-evaluation, to do *teshuvah*, and to strengthen ourselves in Torah and mitzvos... one of the main lessons to take from this *mageifah* [plague], and especially from the distressing closure of our temporary *mikdashai me’at* [miniature Temples], is that we must sincerely beg for the *Beis Hamikdash*.”

WE HAVE NO ONE ELSE TO RELY UPON

“The *mishnah* [at the end of *mesechta Sotah*] mentions that even the *ruchniyusdik* [spiritual] elements that we have always relied upon will be dismantled during *Ikvesa d’Meshicha*. The *mishnah* gives the example of *chachmah* [wisdom] – “*chachmah* will decay”. While some view wisdom as something that they have naturally and that they can always rely upon, that is not the case. Wisdom is a continuous gift from Hashem. When Hashem sees fit to give it, a person is intelligent. And if Hashem sees fit to take it from him, he will simply not have his intellectual ability anymore...In the past months, our shuls and yeshivos were closed. Perhaps Hashem caused this to happen to bring us toward the clarity that we cannot rely on anything, even the backbone of our *ruchniyus* strength – our places of Torah and *tefillah*. Our *ruchniyus* support systems are also an ongoing gift from Hashem that we do not have through our own power, nor is it in our control. Hashem enables us to have them, and He can take them away from us in the blink of an eye. Even in our spiritual lives, *ein lanu l’hisha’ein ela al Avinu Shebashamayim* [We don’t have anyone to rely upon, except our Father in Heaven].”

**All bolded text throughout this article is emphasis that was added by the author of the article. I am indebted to Rabbi Yisroel Moshe Sorotzkin for providing me with an electronic version of his books to use for this article, as well as for looking over this article and offering guidance, and to my dear friend Shmuel Michles for bringing these books to my attention, making the connection between us, and facilitating everything.*

THE TINY FINGERPRINT OF HASHEM

"During normal times, we rely on the government for support in different areas, the healthcare system to keep us healthy, and the consumer supply chain, which ordinarily affords us with unlimited access to any product we may need. During the COVID-19 crisis, we were shown the futility of relying on any of these.

What shook our faith in these formidable institutions? A microscopic virus. If we think about it, this follows a pattern we've seen before in history: When Hashem wants to teach us that

He alone runs the world, He uses something small and insignificant.

Og Melech Habareshan [an Amorite king who was a giant and who was slain by Moshe] is the eternal symbol of superhuman strength and power. The Gemara (Brachos 54b) tells us that Og was holding a mountain above his head, prepared to hurl it at *Klal Yisrael*, when Hashem brought him down with weak, unremarkable insects – ants. Hashem directed the ants to tunnel around the base of the mountain, causing its centre to fall onto Og's head,

killing him.

Something strikingly similar happened to Titus. After conquering Eretz Yisrael and destroying the *Beis Hamikdash* [Temple] unhindered, Titus was traveling back to Rome on a boat when a storm erupted. Titus arrogantly challenged Heaven and taunted, 'Are You only able to fight me at sea?' Hashem responded, 'Proud one, I will bring your downfall through the smallest of creatures.' A tiny insect then flew into Titus's ear and began pecking at his brain. For seven years, the insect caused

Titus to suffer excruciating headaches, until it eventually brought about his premature death.

Likewise, the midrash (end of *Parshas Korach*) says that before Mashiach's arrival, Hashem will show the nations of the world that they do not have strength of their own by sending a *beryah kalah shebibruim* – the most insignificant of creations – to dismantle the world.

The tiny virus He sent recently certainly accomplished that." **III**

THE RELATIVE SIZE OF PARTICLES

From the COVID-19 pandemic to the U.S. West Coast wildfires, some of the biggest threats now are also the most microscopic. A particle needs to be 10 microns (µm) or less before it can be inhaled into your respiratory tract. But just how small are these specks?

Here's a look at the relative sizes of some familiar particles »

