TORAH STUDIES

Vayishlach

Fear Has a Weak Spot

How Trust Can Loosen Anxiety's Grip Before Reality Even Changes

PARSHAH OVERVIEW

Vayishlach

Jacob returns to the Holy Land after a twenty-year stay in Charan and sends angel-emissaries to Esau in hopes of a reconciliation. But his messengers report that his brother is on the warpath with four hundred armed men. Jacob prepares for war, prays, and sends Esau a large gift (consisting of hundreds of head of livestock) to appease him.

That night, Jacob ferries his family and possessions across the Jabok River; he, however, remains behind and encounters the angel that embodies the spirit of Esau, with whom he wrestles until daybreak. Jacob suffers a dislocated hip but vanquishes the supernal creature, who bestows on him the name Israel, which means "he who prevails over the Divine."

Jacob and Esau meet, embrace, and kiss, but part ways. Jacob purchases a plot of land near Shechem, whose crown prince—also called Shechem—abducts and rapes Jacob's daughter Dinah. Dinah's brothers Simeon and Levi avenge the deed by killing all male inhabitants of the city after rendering them vulnerable by convincing them to circumcise themselves.

Jacob journeys on. Rachel dies while giving birth to her second son, Benjamin, and is buried in a roadside grave near Bethlehem. Reuben loses the birthright because he interferes with his father's marital life. Jacob arrives in Hebron to his father, Isaac, who later dies at age 180. (Rebecca had passed away before Jacob's arrival.)

Our *parshah* concludes with a detailed account of Esau's wives, children, and grandchildren; the family histories of the people of Se'ir, among whom Esau settled; and a list of the eight kings who ruled Edom, the land of Esau's and Se'ir's descendants.

QUESTION FOR DISCUSSION

What is your most effective technique for controlling your fear?



TEXT 1

Genesis 32:7–8

ז. וַיָּשֻׁבוּ הַמַּלְאָכִים אֶל יַעֲקֹב לֵאמֹר, בָּאנוּ אֶל אָחִיךָ
אֶל עֵשָׂו וְגַם הֹלֵךְ לִקְרָאתְךָ וְאַרְבַּע מֵאוֹת אִישׁ עִמּוֹ.

ח. וַיִּירָא יַעֲקֹב מְאֹד וַיֵּצֶר לוֹ.

7. And the messengers returned to Jacob, saying, “We came to your brother Esau, and he is also coming to meet you, and four hundred men are with him.”

8. And Jacob was greatly afraid and distressed.

Jacob sent messengers to make peace with Esau, but when he heard that he was coming with four hundred men to kill him, he was filled with fear.





When Moses saw an Egyptian attacking a Jew, he killed the Egyptian. The next day, when two men threatened to reveal what he had done, Moses became afraid.

TEXT 2A

Exodus 2:13–14

יג. וַיֵּצֵא בַּיּוֹם הַשֵּׁנִי וְהִנֵּה שְׁנֵי אֲנָשִׁים עִבְרִים נִצִּים, וַיֹּאמֶר לָרָשָׁע לָמָּה תַכֶּה רֵעֶךָ.

יד. וַיֹּאמֶר מִי שָׂמְךָ לְאִישׁ שַׂר וְשֹׁפֵט עָלֵינוּ, הַלְהָרְגֵנִי אַתָּה אֹמֵר כַּאֲשֶׁר הָרַגְתָּ אֶת הַמִּצְרִי, וַיִּירָא מֹשֶׁה וַיֹּאמַר אָכֵן נוֹדַע הַדָּבָר.

13. And he went out the next day, and behold, two Hebrews were fighting, and he said to the wicked one, “Why do you strike your fellow?”

14. And he said, “Who made you a prince and judge over us? Are you going to kill me as you killed the Egyptian?” And Moses feared and said, “Indeed, the matter is known.”

TEXT 2B

Numbers 21:33–34

לג. וַיִּפְנוּ וַיַּעֲלוּ דֶּרֶךְ הַבָּשָׁן, וַיֵּצֵא עוֹג מֶלֶךְ הַבָּשָׁן לִקְרָאתָם הוּא וְכָל עַמּוֹ לַמִּלְחָמָה אֶדְרֶעִי.

לד. וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל מֹשֶׁה אַל תִּירָא אֹתוֹ, כִּי בְיָדְךָ נָתַתִּי אֹתוֹ וְאֶת כָּל עַמּוֹ וְאֶת אַרְצוֹ.

33. And they turned and went up the way of Bashan, and Og, the king of Bashan, went out with all his people to war against them at Edrei.

34. And G-d said to Moses, “Do not fear him, for I have placed him and his nation and his land in your hands.”



Years later, when Moses faced the giant King Og ,he was also afraid.

TEXT 3A

Midrash, *Bereshit Rabah* 76:1

שְׁנֵי בְּנֵי אָדָם הִבְטִיחָן הַקָּדוֹשׁ בָּרוּךְ הוּא וְנִתְיָרְאוּ, הַבָּחוּר שֶׁבָּאָבוֹת וְהַבָּחוּר שֶׁבַּנְּבִיאִים.

הַבָּחוּר שֶׁבָּאָבוֹת זֶה יַעֲקֹב, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר, "כִּי יַעֲקֹב בָּחַר לוֹ יָ-הּ" (תְּהִלִּים קלה, ד). וְאָמַר לוֹ הַקָּדוֹשׁ בָּרוּךְ הוּא, "וְהִנֵּה אָנֹכִי עִמָּךְ" (בְּרֵאשִׁית כח, טו), וּבַסּוֹף נִתְיָרֵא, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר, "וַיִּירָא יַעֲקֹב" (שָׁם לג, ח).

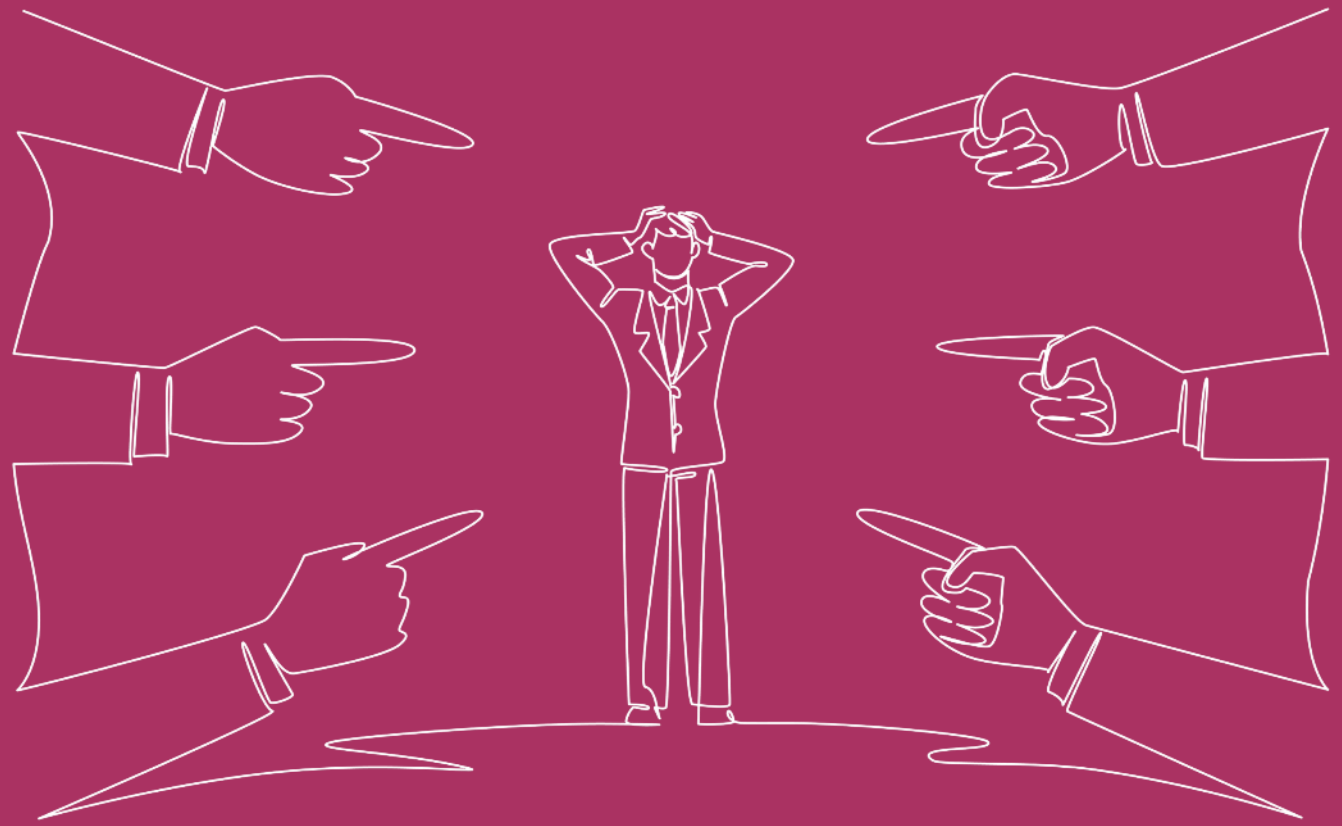
הַבָּחוּר שֶׁבַּנְּבִיאִים זֶה מֹשֶׁה, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר, "לוּלֵי מֹשֶׁה בְחִירוֹ" (תְּהִלִּים קו כג), וְאָמַר לוֹ הַקָּדוֹשׁ בָּרוּךְ הוּא "כִּי אֶהְיֶה עִמָּךְ" (שְׁמוֹת ג, יב), וּלְבַסּוֹף נִתְיָרֵא, "וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל מֹשֶׁה אַל תִּירָא אֹתוֹ" (בַּמִּדְבָּר כא, לד). אֵינוֹ אוֹמֵר אַל תִּירָא אֹתוֹ, אֶלָּא לְמִי שֶׁנִּתְיָרֵא.

Two people were promised by G-d and still experienced fear: the best of the patriarchs and the best of the prophets.

The best of the patriarchs is Jacob, as it is stated, “Jacob was chosen by G-d” (Psalms 135:4). Though G-d assured him, “Behold, I am with you” (Genesis 28:15), he was nevertheless afraid, as it is stated, “And Jacob was afraid” (ibid. 32:8).

The best of the prophets is Moses, as it is stated, “Moses is G-d’s chosen one” (Psalms 106:23). Though G-d told him “I will be with you” (Exodus 3:12), he was nevertheless afraid, as it is written, “And G-d said to Moses, ‘Do not fear him’” (Numbers 21:34). One only reassures someone not to fear if they are afraid.

The sages criticize their being fearful despite G-d's promise to protect them.



TEXT 3B

Rabbi Shmuel Yaffe Ashkenazi, *Yefeh To'ar*, ad loc.

"שְׁנֵי בְּנֵי אָדָם". לוֹמַר שֶׁאַף שֶׁהֵם הַבָּחוּר שֶׁבָּאָבוֹת וְהַבָּחוּר שֶׁבַּנְּבִיאִים, בְּעִנְיָן זֶה אֵינָם אֶלָּא כִּשְׁנֵי בְּנֵי אָדָם בְּעָלְמָא.

They are called "two [ordinary] people": this teaches us that though they are respectively the best of the patriarchs and the best of the prophets, in this respect, they are merely ordinary people.

Lesson: Don’t Be Afraid Like Them

Rav Nachman of Breslov

“Know that a person must pass over a very narrow bridge, and the main thing is not to fear at all.”



Jacob had already encountered Esau’s dangerous nature when he exchanged the birthright for lentil stew.

TEXT 4

Rashi, Genesis 25:29

וְהוּא עָיֵף בִּרְצִיחָה.

He was depleted and exhausted because he had committed murder.

QUESTIONS

Fear is a natural response to danger. Jacob knew that Esau was dangerous, so why do the sages criticize his fear? What could he have done differently?

Faith is believing that G-d is involved in every detail of our lives. When we trust that everything comes from Him, fear loses its power.



TEXT 5

II Samuel 16:10

כֹּה יְקַלֵּל, כִּי ה' אָמַר לוֹ קַלֵּל אֶת דָּוִד,
וּמִי יֹאמַר מַדּוּעַ עָשִׂיתָה כֵּן?

Let him curse, because G-d instructed him, “Curse David.” Who, then, can [have the right to] demand, “Why have you done so?”

QUESTION

How did David know that Shimi was acting on G-d’s command? Maybe he was simply acting on a personal grudge.

TEXT 6

Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi, *Igeret Hakodesh*, ch. 25

וְהֵיכָן אָמַר לְשִׁמְעִי?

אֶלָּא שֶׁמַּחֲשָׁבָה זוֹ שֶׁנָּפְלָה לְשִׁמְעִי בְּלִבּוֹ וּמוֹחוֹ, יָרְדָה מֵאֵת ה'. וְ"רוּחַ פִּיו הַמְּחַיֶּה כָּל צְבָאָם" (תְּהִלִּים לג, ו) הֶחֱיָה רוּחוֹ שֶׁל שִׁמְעִי בְּשָׁעָה שֶׁדִּיבֵּר דְּבָרִים אֵלּוּ לְדָוִד. כִּי אִילּוּ נִסְתַּלֵּק רוּחַ פִּיו יִתְבָּרֵךְ רֶגַע אֶחָד מֵרוּחוֹ שֶׁל שִׁמְעִי, לֹא יָכוֹל לְדַבֵּר מְאוּמָה.

וְזֶהוּ "כִּי ה' אָמַר לוֹ" בָּעֵת הַהִיא מַמָּשׁ "קַלֵּל אֶת דָּוִד".

Where does it say that G-d instructed Shimi?

It means that the thought to curse David that occurred to Shimi's heart and mind descended from G-d. "The breath of G-d's mouth that animates all the hosts of Heaven" (Psalms 33:6) animated Shimi's spirit as he spoke these words to David. For had the breath of G-d's mouth been withdrawn from Shimi's spirit for even a moment, he would have been unable to utter a word.

This is the meaning of the words "G-d instructed him," in that very moment, to "curse David."

ANSWER

David believed that nothing happens without G-d's permission. He saw every challenge as coming from G-d, not from people. Shimi was only an instrument in G-d's hands, so David saw no reason to harm him.

TEXT 7

Talmud, Berachot 60b

לְעוֹלָם יְהֵא אָדָם רָגִיל לוֹמַר "כָּל דְּעָבֵיד רַחֲמָנָא לְטַב עָבֵיד".

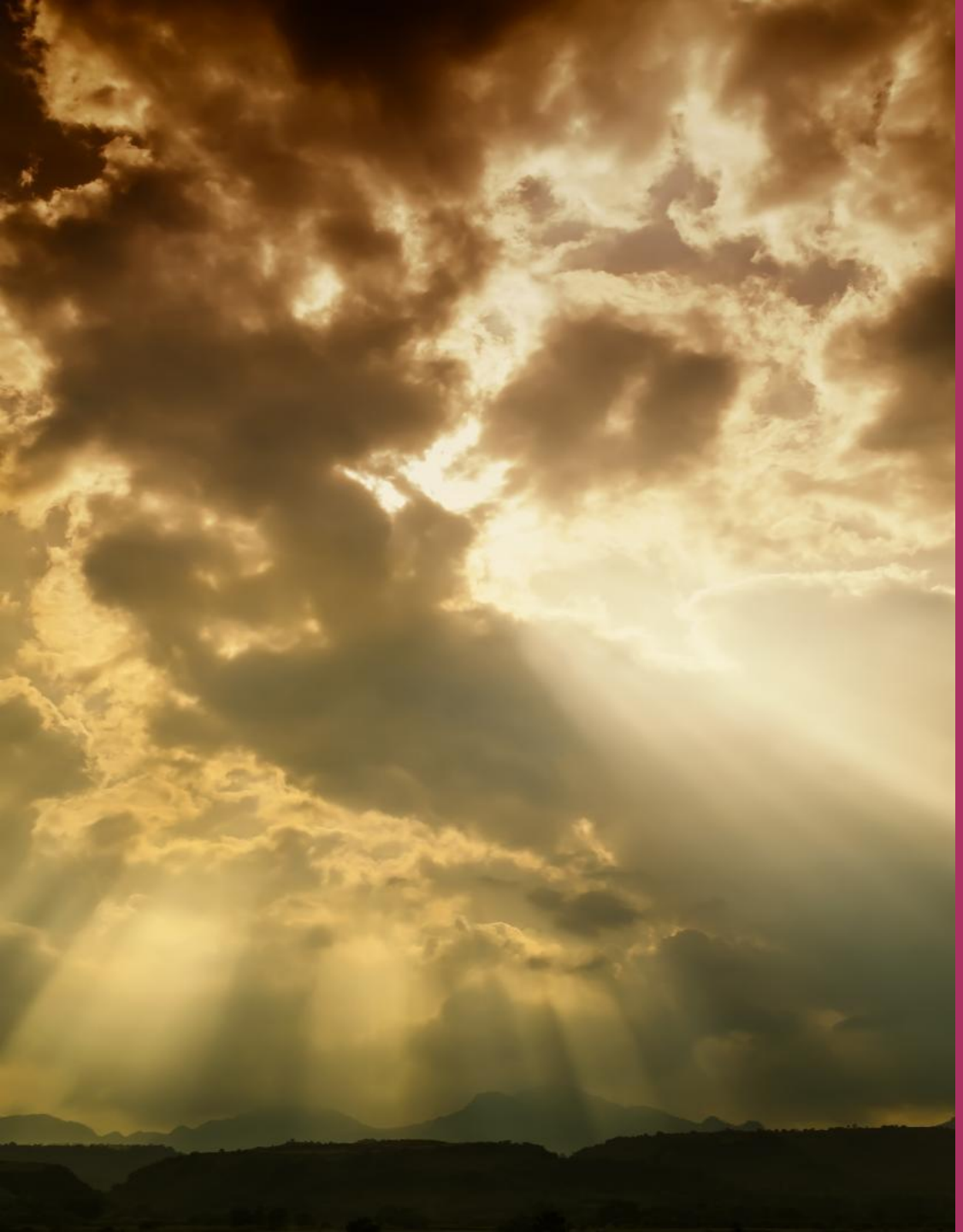
כִּי הָא דְּרַבִּי עֲקִיבָא דַּהֲוָה קָאָזֵיל בְּאוֹרְחָא, מָטָא לְהַהִיא מָתָא, בָּעָא אוּשְׁפִּיזָא לָא יָהֲבִי לֵיהּ. אָמַר, "כָּל דְּעָבֵיד רַחֲמָנָא לְטַב". אָזַל וּבָת בְּדַבְרָא, וַהֲוָה בַּהֲדֵיהּ תַּרְנְגוֹלָא וַחֲמָרָא וּשְׁרָגָא. אָתָא זִיקָא כַּבְיֵיהּ לִשְׁרָגָא, אָתָא שׁוּנְרָא אַכְלֵיהּ לְתַרְנְגוֹלָא, אָתָא אַרְיֵה אַכְלֵיהּ לַחֲמָרָא. אָמַר, "כָּל דְּעָבֵיד רַחֲמָנָא לְטַב".

בֵּיהּ בְּלֵילְיָא אָתָא גְּיָיסָא, שַׁבְיֵיהּ לְמָתָא. אָמַר לְהוּ, "לָאו אֲמָרִי לְכוּ כָּל מַה שֶּׁעוֹשֶׂה הַקָּדוֹשׁ בָּרוּךְ הוּא הַכֹּל לְטוֹבָה?"

One must always accustom oneself to saying, “Everything that G-d does, He does for the best.”

Like the time when Rabbi Akiva was walking along the road, and he came to a certain city and inquired about lodging, but they refused him. He declared, “Everything that G-d does is for the best.” He went and slept in a field. He had with him a rooster, a donkey, and a candle. A gust of wind came and extinguished the candle, a cat came and ate the rooster, and a lion came and ate the donkey. He said, “Everything that G-d does is for the best.”

That night, an army came and took the city’s population into captivity. [It turned out that Rabbi Akiva alone, who was not in the city and had no lit candle, noisy rooster, or donkey to give away his location, was saved.] He said to them, “Didn’t I tell you? Everything that G-d does is all for the best.”



Faith means believing that not only does G-d control everything but that everything He does is for our good. Even when we face hardship or loss, we turn to G-d to try to discover what He wants. We know He has a good reason for challenging us, possibly a consequence or a wake-up call to repent.

TEXT 8

Rabbi Aharon Halevi of Barcelona, *Sefer Hachinuch, Mitzvah* 241

שֶׁיֵּדַע הָאָדָם . . . כִּי כָּל אֲשֶׁר יִקָּרֵהוּ מִטּוֹב עַד רַע, הוּא סִבָּה שֶׁתָּבוֹא עָלָיו מֵאֵת הַשֵּׁם בָּרוּךְ הוּא. וּמִיַּד הָאָדָם מִיַּד אִישׁ אָחִיו לֹא יִהְיֶה דָּבָר בִּלְתִּי רְצוֹן הַשֵּׁם בָּרוּךְ הוּא.

עַל כֵּן כְּשֶׁיְצַעֲרֵהוּ אוֹ יַכְאִיבֵהוּ אָדָם, יֵדַע בְּנַפְשׁוֹ כִּי עֲוֹנֹתָיו גָּרְמוּ, וְהַשֵּׁם יִתְבָּרַךְ גָּזַר עָלָיו בְּכָךְ. וְלֹא יָשִׁית מַחְשְׁבוֹתָיו לִנְקֹם מִמֶּנּוּ, כִּי הוּא אֵינוֹ סִבַּת רָעָתוֹ . . . וּכְמוֹ שֶׁאָמַר דָּוִד עָלָיו הַשָּׁלוֹם, "הַנִּחוּ לוֹ וִיקַלֵּל כִּי אָמַר לוֹ ה'" (שְׁמוּאֵל ב טז, יא).

We are required to know . . . that everything that happens to us, good or bad, comes from G-d. Without G-d, nothing can come to us from the hand of a human.

Hence, when someone vexes or hurts us, we must know that our sins caused it and that G-d ordained it [so we could improve our ways]. We must never consider taking vengeance against [those who hurt us], since they are not the cause of our troubles. . . . As King David of blessed memory said, “Let him curse, because G-d instructed him to curse” (II Samuel 16:11).

ANSWER

When our sages criticized Jacob and Moses for fearing, it was not for the natural response itself but for not fully controlling it by focusing on G-d's control over the situation. That is why it is described as a lack of faith.

Faith gives perspective; it doesn’t remove suffering or change outcomes.

It reassures us that everything is for our best, even if we don’t understand, and helps us move from trust to deeper faith.



TEXT 9

Rabbi Bachya ibn Pakudah, *Duties of the Heart, Shaar Habitachon* (Gates of Trust), ch. 1–2

מַהוּת הַבִּטָּחוֹן הִיא מְנוּחַת נֶפֶשׁ הַבּוֹטֵחַ, וְשֶׁיִּהְיֶה לִבּוֹ סָמוּךְ עַל מִי שֶׁבָּטַח עָלָיו שֶׁיַּעֲשֶׂה הַטּוֹב וְהַנָּכוֹן לוֹ בָּעִנְיָן אֲשֶׁר יִבְטַח עָלָיו . . .

שֶׁיִּהְיֶה מִי שֶׁבָּטַח עָלָיו בְּתַכְלִית הַנְּדִיבוּת וְהַחֶסֶד לְמִי שֶׁרָאוּי לוֹ וּלְמִי שֶׁאֵינוֹ רָאוּי לוֹ, וְתִהְיֶה נְדִיבוּתוֹ מַתְמֶדֶת וְחַסְדּוֹ נִמְשָׁךְ, לֹא יִכָּרֵת וְלֹא יִפָּסֵק.

The essence of trust is that those who trust have complete peace of mind. Their hearts are anchored in the One they trust to do what is good and right for them, in whatever they entrust to them. . . .

The One in whom you trust must be absolutely generous and kind to those who deserve it, and to those who don't. Their kindness is constant, and their generosity never ceases; it is without interruption.



Trust in G-d means placing our fate in His hands, confident that He will protect and guide us. Even if we don’t understand or feel deserving, we trust that He will shield us, because He is ultimate kindness and always acts for our good.

TEXT 10

The Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, *Likutei Sichot* 36, pp. 4–5

חוֹבַת הַבִּטָּחוֹן . . . הִיא . . . שֶׁהָאָדָם יִסְמוֹךְ וְיִשָּׁעֵן עַל הַקָּדוֹשׁ בָּרוּךְ הוּא, עַד שֶׁיַּשְׁלִיךְ כָּל גּוֹרָלוֹ בְּיַד הַשֵּׁם, כְּמוֹ שֶׁכָּתוּב "הַשְׁלֵךְ עַל הַשֵּׁם יְהָבְךָ" (תְּהִלִּים נה, כג), שֶׁאֵין לוֹ שׁוּם מִשְׁעָן בָּעוֹלָם בִּלְעָדָיו יִתְבָּרַךְ . . .

אֵין הַפֵּירוּשׁ בְּבִטָּחוֹן, שֶׁמַּאֲמִין, שֶׁכֵּיוָן שֶׁחַסְדֵי הַשֵּׁם הֵם בְּלִי מְדִידָה וְהַגְבָּלָה, בֵּין לָרָאוּי בֵּין לְמִי שֶׁאֵינוֹ רָאוּי, לָכֵן הוּא יְקַבֵּל אֶת חַסְדֵי הַשֵּׁם בְּלִי שׁוּם עֲבוֹדָה מִצִּדּוֹ (כִּי לְפִי זֶה בָּטֵל כָּל הָעִנְיָן דְּשָׂכָר וְעוֹנֶשׁ). אֶלָּא בִּטָּחוֹן הוּא עֲבוֹדָה וִיגִיעָה בְּנַפְשׁוֹ, וְהִיא מְבִיאָה אֶת חַסְדֵי הַשֵּׁם הַבָּאִים כְּתוֹצָאָה מֵעֲבוֹדַת וִיגִיעַת הָאָדָם לְבָטוֹחַ בַּהַשֵּׁם. עַל יְדֵי שֶׁהָאָדָם סוֹמֵךְ בֶּאֱמֶת וּבְעוֹמֶק נִשְׁמָתוֹ רַק עַל הַקָּדוֹשׁ בָּרוּךְ הוּא לְבַד, עַד שֶׁאֵינוֹ דּוֹאֵג כְּלָל, הֲרֵי הִתְעוֹרְרוּת זוֹ גּוֹפָא פּוֹעֶלֶת שֶׁהַקָּדוֹשׁ בָּרוּךְ הוּא מִתְנַהֵג עִמּוֹ בְּאוֹפֶן זֶה, שֶׁמֵּטִיב עִמּוֹ (גַּם אִם לוּלֵא זֹאת אֵינוֹ רָאוּי לָזֶה) . . .

The obligation to trust in G-d . . . is that we must rely and lean on G-d, to the point that we cast our entire fate into His hands, as it says, "Cast your burden upon G-d" (Psalms 55:23): to have no support in the world but for G-d. . . .

This doesn't mean that we believe that since G-d's kindness is without measure or limit, we will receive His kindness whether we deserve it or not. (If that were true, the whole concept of reward and punishment would be upended.) Rather, the *mitzvah* to trust is a form of inner work and spiritual exertion. This very effort stimulates G-d's kindness; it results from our efforts to trust in Him. When we truly rely only on G-d in the depth of our soul, to the point of eradicating all fear, our very inspiration stimulates a reciprocal response from G-d—to do good for us even if we are otherwise undeserving. . . .

TEXT 10

The Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, *Likutei Sichot* 36, pp. 4–5

וְכַאֲשֶׁר הוּא סוֹמֵךְ אַךְ וְרַק עַל הַקָּדוֹשׁ בָּרוּךְ הוּא לְבַד (מִבְּלִי לַעֲשׂוֹת חֶשְׁבּוֹנוֹת, אִם אֶפְשָׁר לוֹ לְהִנָּצֵל כו'), אֲזַי הַהַנְהָגָה עִמּוֹ מִלְמַעְלָה הוּא מִדָּה כְּנֶגֶד מִדָּה. שֶׁהַקָּדוֹשׁ בָּרוּךְ הוּא שׁוֹמֵר עָלָיו וּמְרַחֵם עָלָיו גַּם אִם עַל פִּי חֶשְׁבּוֹן אֵינוֹ רָאוּי לְכָךְ שֶׁיִּהְיֶה טוֹב לוֹ בְּטוֹב הַנִּרְאֶה וְהַנִּגְלֶה דַּוְקָא.

When we rely exclusively on G-d, with nary a thought about how realistic it is to expect to be saved in such circumstances, G-d treats us in kind. He is merciful to us, even if by a strict reckoning, we are not worthy of being treated in a manner that is visibly and openly good.

QUESTION

On what basis can we trust that things will always be good if it is sometimes in our best interest to suffer?

ANSWER

When we set aside doubt and trust in G-d entirely, we are rewarded for that trust and merit G-d's complete protection.



Jacob and Moses were not criticized for feeling fear but for not rising above it through trust in G-d. Fear reflects a lack of trust that G-d will protect us, even when it seems unlikely.

When we choose trust over fear, we create protection. G-d surrounds those who trust with kindness, and through that trust, blessings and sometimes even miracles can unfold.



KEY POINTS

1. A Jew is obligated both to believe in G-d and to trust in G-d.
2. Belief means knowing that He exists, that He directs every detail of our lives, and that He is good.
3. It follows that nothing happens by accident. Even hardship ultimately serves our good, and our response should be prayer and a deeper focus on Him.
4. Trust goes further. It means living with the certainty that no harm will befall us, even if it seems deserved or unavoidable. The very trust creates merit that causes G-d to change our situation for the better.
5. Belief and trust together bring calm in moments of fear. When we truly lean in to trust, fear loses its grip.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