**Teaching Hashgachah Pratis**

**Rav Yosef Salant and the *Pachim Ketanim***

***Teacher’s Guide***

*Hashgachah Pratis*, or Divine Providence, is one of those principles that people tend to either believe in entirely or not at all. Some feel that every single little episode in life has meaning because G-d ordained it, while others claim that there is no such thing as Providence, and therefore everything is random. Judaism affirms the belief in Divine Providence. In fact, it counts amongst its fundamentals of faith the belief in G-d’s omniscience (that He knows everything) and that He rewards and punishes us based on our actions. But the Jewish concept of Hashgachah Pratis is anything but simplistic. In other words, we cannot know for certain why any particular thing happens to any particular person, but we can attempt to understand the general principles by which G-d runs the world.

Divine Providence is defined as both G-d’s awareness of every detail of Creation – including each person’s behavior and innermost thoughts and feelings – and His personal involvement and relationship with us, as based on who we are and what we’re doing with our lives. The Sar Esav came to challenge this cornerstone of Jewish belief through the incident of the *pachim ketanim*.

How can one teach a newcomer to Judaism, or even someone with a background, a dynamic illustration of the contrasting worldviews on Hashgachah Pratis? Rabbi Yosef Salant in his sefer Be’er Yosef, explains the clashing perspectives on Hashgachah Pratis through the confrontation of the Sar Esav with Yaakov Avinu on his return to Eretz Yisroel from Charan. Yaakov crosses his family and possessions over the Yabok River. He goes back to the side of the river where he started from and is pounced upon by the angel of Esav when he is all alone.

**1. Bereishis 32:25 – The Angel of Esav confronts Yaakov Avinu.**

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| And Yaakov was left alone and a man wrestled with him until the break of Dawn. | ויותר יעקב לבדו ויאבק איש עמו עד עלות השחר. |

How was Yaakov left alone if he was traveling with his entire family?

**2. Rashi, Bereishis 32:25**

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| [Yaakov] forgot his small containers and returned for them [ to the other side of the river]. | שכח פכים קטנים וחזר עליהם: |

Why would Yaakov return for seemingly insignificant small containers?

**3. Talmud Bavli Chullin 91a – Yaakov doesn’t steal from others and needs to preserve his possessions.**

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| **And Yaakov remained alone.** Rebbe Elazar said that he returned on account of his small containers. From here we learn that the righteous love their possessions more than themselves (since it appears he endangered himself to return for the containers). Why do they love their property so much? Because the righteous do not involve themselves in theft. | **ויותר יעקב לבדו.** א"ר אלעזר שנשתייר על פכין קטנים מכאן לצדיקים שחביב עליהם ממונם יותר מגופם וכל כך למה לפי שאין פושטין ידיהן בגזל. |

No one risks their life for their assets, especially a righteous man like Yaakov.

*[*Perhaps an exception: *A woman in China reportedly risked her life in order to save her iPhone by jumping into a two-meter deep lake. According to Chinese paper,*People's Daily*, the woman accidentally dropped her iPhone 5 into the Longtan Lake in Beijing last week. The temperature in the lake was apparently between -2 and 9 degrees Celsius (28 and 48 degrees Fahrenheit), and so she put her life at serious risk. (People’s Daily, February 18, 2016)]*

So why did Yaakov return for the containers? Only to emphasize that the righteous don’t steal?

**4. Rabbi Yosef Tzvi Salant, Be’er Yosef, Parshas Vayishlach – How can the righteous love their possessions more than their body?**

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| It is very difficult to understand that loving one’s possessions more than one’s physical body should be an attribute of the righteous, for isn’t it written in the Book of Job (2:4), “Skin for the sake of skin! Whatever a person has, he would relinquish to spare his life.” This is the nature of every person. This should doubly apply to the righteous for they surely would not risk themselves for something as inconsequential as small containers. These containers should not have been worth the time or the effort to go and return for them in the middle of the night. | והנה קשה מאוד להבין שמדת הצדיקים יהיה שממונם חביב עליהם יותר מגופם, הלא עור בעד עור וכל אשר לאיש יתן בעד נפשו (איוב ב), וזוהי מדת כל אדם, ומכ"ש הצדיקים שלא יסתכנו בגופם בעד ממון פחות ערך כמו פכים קטנים שאינם שווים בנזק הזמן והטורח להשאר לבדו, או לחזור עליהם (לפי מש"כ רש"י) בחשכת הלילה. |

Why then, did Yaakov cross alone to retrieve the small containers? Yaakov returned for the containers since he recognized that all of one’s possessions are given by G-d and have purpose.

**5. Be’er Yosef, Parshas Vayishlach – Yaakov recognized that all of one’s possessions are given from G-d and have purpose.**

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| The intent of the Talmud’s statement, “Their possessions are more beloved than their bodies” is that it they should physically exert themselves for their possessions. And this principle is addressed in the Talmud (Yoma 38b), “No one can touch an object that is meant for someone else, even the slightest bit.” We derive from this that there is a special Providence over every owned object, even the most seemingly inconsequential object. For each object is directed specifically to its owner.  This principle is also discussed in the Talmud (Sotah 2a): This home is destined for so and so, this field is destined for so and so” …  Since this item is directed to its owner by Heaven, the item is appropriate and carefully measured for the needs of its owner. Therefore, the righteous know how to value and appreciate everything that comes into their possession, whether expensive or of little value, because it is through Divine Providence that this item belongs to them. And certainly this object is necessary for them to help them actualize their potential. Therefore, the righteous do not spare any trouble or effort to prevent the loss of any of their possessions. | הכוונה בכאן מה שאמרו שחביב עליהם ממונם יותר מגופם היינו מטורח גופם ועמלם, שכדאי להם כל יגיעה וטורח גופם עבור ממונם.והענין בזה הוא, דאמרו בגמרא (יומא ל"ח ב) אין אדם נוגע במה שמוכן לחבירו אפילו כמלוא נימא, מבורר מזה שיש השגחה מיוחדת על כל דבר פרטי אפילו על החלק היותר קטן כמלוא נימא שזה המלוא נימא יגיע דוקא לאותו פלוני.  וכמו שאמרו ג"כ בגמרא (סוטא ב) בית פלוני לפלוני שדה פלונית לפלוני  וכיון שמן השמים מושגח שאותו הדבר מתאים ומדוד במדה נכונה ומדוקדקת שיהיה שייך ויגיע לאותו איש, וא"כ הצדיקים יודעים להוקיר ולהחשיב כל דבר גדון או קטן שהגיע לידם מפני שהוא בהשגחה פרטית מן השמים שיהיה אותו הדבר שלהם, ובודאי שיש בו צורך לשלימותם ולכן אינם חסים על טרחם ועמלם ומתאמצים בכל היכולת שלא לאבד שום דבר השייך להם. |

(See also the Arizal, Parshas Vayishlach, explaining Bereishis 32:25.)

Why did the Angel of Esav decide to attack Yaakov Avinu specifically at this time?

**6. Be’er Yosef, Parshas Vayishlach – Sar Esav came to challenge Yaakov’s belief in Hashgachah.**

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| We can explained the following Talmud passage (Chullin 91a) along the same lines: Rebbe Yehoshua ben Levi said, “We learn from here that the dust rose from their feet during their altercation up to the Throne of Glory in Heaven. [We derive this as follows:] It is written here (Bereishis 32:25) “He wrestled with him,” and it is written there (Nachum 1:3), “And clouds are the dust at His feet.”[[1]](#footnote-1)  …and according to what we have explained we may suggest that this angel, who, as the Sages explain, was the minister of Esav, the Accuser, and the evil inclination, wanted to challenge and deter Yaakov from his pure and strong faith (in Hashgachah Pratis).  This is what the Sages had in mind when they said: “*Their dust rose up to the Throne of Glory;”* that is, there was an ideological confrontation between Yaakov and Esav regarding whether even those things that are seemingly minute and insignificant like the dust that man tramples with his feet are also overseen directly from the lofty heights of the Throne of Glory. | ובענין זה יש לבאר במה שאמרו שם בגמ' א"ר יהושע בן לוי מלמד שהעלו אבק מרגלותם עד כסא הכבוד, כתיב הכא בהאבקו עמו, וכתיב התם (נחום א) וענן אבק רגליו,  לפי מה שנתבאר אפשר בזה ג"כ שהמלאך הרי היה שרו של עשו כמבואר בחז"ל והוא השטן והיצר הרע, ורצה להסיתו ולהדיחו מהאמונה הטהורה והחזקה.  וזהו בכוונתם במה שאמרו שהעלו אבק רגליהם עד כסא הכבוד, היינו שההאבקות וההתנצחות שביניהם הייתה בזה אם גם הדברים היותר דקים ושפלים כאבק שאדם דש ברגליו הוא ג"כ מושגח ממרומים עד כסא הכבוד. |

**7. Be’er Yosef, Parshas Vayishlach – Even mundane occurrences and bodily functions are in G-d’s immediate awareness.**

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| This principal of Hashgachah Pratis is expressed in writing in the name of the Vilna Gaon (in the book Imrei Noam) regarding the part of the blessing of *Asher Yatzar,* *“…It is well known before Your Throne of Glory…”* Why should this phrase be mentioned in the blessing after using the restroom? The purpose is to counter those who contend that it is impossible that G-d is interested, supervises and directs such a lowly world. Therefore, we declare, “*Before Your Throne of Glory”…*to say that even from there G-d is supervising such mundane things. | וכעין זה כתבו בשם הגר"א (בס' אמרי נעם) על מה שאומרים בברכת אשר יצר, גלוי וידוע לפני כסא כבודך וז"ל: מה שמזכירים כאן כסא הכבוד בברכת עשיית צרכיו, הוא לאפוקי מדעת האומרים כי אי אפשר שהקב"ה ישגיח על עולם שפל כזה. לכך אנו אומרים שאפילו לפני כסא הכבוד... אפילו משם הוא משגיח על דברים שפלים כאלה. |

**8. Complete Artscroll Siddur, *Asher Yatzar –* Blessing upon exiting the lavatory, p. 15 – The intricate workings of the intestines, kidneys and other organs are supervised by G-d.**

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| Blessed are You, G-d, our L-rd, King of the universe, Who formed man with wisdom, and created within him openings and cavities. It is obvious and known before Your Throne of Glory that if a single one of them were to be ruptured or blocked, it would be impossible to exist and to stand before You. Blessed are You, G-d, Who heals all flesh and acts wondrously. | ברוך אתה ה' אלקינו מלך העולם אשר יצר את האדם בחכמה וברא בו נקבים נקבים חלולים חלולים גלוי וידוע לפני כסא כבודך שאם יפתח אחד מהם או יסתם אחד מהם אי אפשר להתקיים ולעמוד לפניך. ברוך אתה ה' רופא כל בשר ומפליא לעשות. |

See further the NLE Morasha Shiurim, [Hashgachah Pratis I](http://nleresources.com/nle-morasha-syllabus/purpose-of-man-in-the-world/hashgacha-pratit-i), [Hashgachah Pratis II](http://nleresources.com/nle-morasha-syllabus/purpose-of-man-in-the-world/hashgacha-pratit-ii).

1. The first verse quoted refers to the struggle between Yaakov and the angel of Esav. The word for “and he wrestled” is ויאבק. Its root is אבק, which we see from the second verse quoted means “dust.” This indicates that the wrestling between Yaakov and the angel involved dust. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)