

“ואתם הדבקים בה’ אלקיכם חיים כולכם היום”

“But you who cling to Hashem, your G-d — you are all alive today”

## The Rambam’s Powerful Words Concerning Hashem’s “Hashgocheh” that it is incumbent upon every Jew to learn and remember

Among Moshe’s declarations to all of Yisroel in this week’s parsha, parshas Vaeschanan, we find (Devorim 4, 4): **“ואתם”** “ואתם הדבקים בה’ אלקיכם חיים כולכם היום” — but you who cling to Hashem, your G-d — you are all alive today.” At first glance, the meaning of this possuk is so simple that it does not seem to require any further explanation or elucidation. In fact, from this simple declaration, we can also deduce the converse: if one does not cling to Hashem, chas v’shalom, one does not merit the gift of life.

In this essay, we wish to elaborate on the deeper significance of this possuk and its relevance to every Jew: **“ואתם הדבקים בה’ אלקיכם חיים כולכם היום”** — but you who cling to Hashem, your G-d — you are all alive today.” First, however, let us examine another related possuk in this week’s parsha (Devorim 4, 35): **“אתה הראת לדעת כי ה’ הוא האלקים אין”** “אתה הראת לדעת כי ה’ הוא האלקים אין” — **“עוד מלבדו”** — you have been shown to know that Hashem, He is the G-d! There is none besides Him! We find the following elucidation in the Gemoreh (Sanhedrin 67b): **“אין עוד מלבדו”**, “אמר רבי חנינא אפילו לדבר כשפים” — “There is none besides Him” even regarding the matter of sorcery. Then our blessed sages proceed to relate an incident involving Rabbi Chanina (ibid. and Chullin 7b):

**“היא איתתא דהות קא מהדרא למשקל עפרא מתותי כרעיה דרבי חנינא”** there was a certain woman who sought to take dust from beneath Rabbi Chanina’s feet, in order to harm him Rabbi — **אמר לה, אי מסתייעת זילי עבידי** — with her sorcery Chanina told her to attempt whatever she may, he did not fear it is written: **“אין עוד מלבדו כתיב”** — her, for besides Him! Rashi explains that he was informing her that what happens to him is in Hashem’s hands and not hers; if Hashem wants him to live, she cannot harm him; and if she is able to harm him, it is Hashem’s decree — which he willingly accepts. Then the Gemoreh queries is this — **למה נקרא שמן כשפים, שמכחישין פמליא של מעלה** — indeed so? After all, Rabbi Yochanan stated that they are called

sorcerers, “mechashfim,” because they contradict the heavenly family. The Gemoreh answers due to Rabbi Chanina’s great merit, he was in a different — category and had no reason to fear sorcery

In truth, the commentaries are perplexed by this exchange. (a) How could Rabbi Yochanan dare define the power of sorcery as: **“שמכחישין פמליא של מעלה”** — they contradict the heavenly family? As the possuk states explicitly: **“אין עוד”** — **“מלבדו”** — There is none besides Him! So, how could sorcerers possess the ability, chas v’chalilah, to contradict the heavenly family? (b) If, indeed, sorcery has been granted permission from above to contradict the heavenly family, and tremendous merit is required to overcome their influence, how could Rabbi Chanina be so confident that sorcery could not harm him? How could he be so sure of his merits?

A wonderful explanation of this subject is provided for us by the Shem Mi’Shmuel (Vayishlach 5678):

**“ואף שאין מדרך הצדיקים לסמוך על מעשיהם הטובים, מכל מקום ענין כשפים הוא מכוחות חיצונים, שכל מציאותם מצד ההסתר והצמצום, עד שנראה ליש נפרד לעצמו, אבל באמת הם אפס ואין, ומסתברא שכל כוחם הוא נגד האיש, ששכלו איננו כל כך מזוכך כאילו רואה בעיניו שאין עוד מלבדו, ונראה לו שיש בהם מציאות ויש.”**

אבל לאיש ששכלו מזוכך, ורואה אותם כמו שהם באמת אפס ואין, לעומת זה הם באמת אפס ואין בלי שום כח להזיקו. ועל כן רבי חנינא דנפיש זכותיה, אין הפירוש מצוות ומעשים טובים אלא זיכרון השכל, והיה רואה בעיניו ממש שאין עוד מלבדו, וכל ההסתרות לא הספיקו להחשיך את העינים, על כן לא היה רבי חנינא מתיירא כלל.”

He writes that it is not the way of tzaddikim to rest on their laurels and good deeds. Yet, sorcery is a different matter, because it is based on external, negative forces that do not really exist. They are perceived as a separate entity, but that perception is entirely false. They target someone whose intellect is not fully refined; who can be deluded into believing that they possess substance.

However, the owner of a fully refined intellect recognizes sorcery for what it is — a nonexistent façade. They represent no threat to him and are unable to harm him. Thus, when the Gemoreh responds that Rabbi Chanina was a man of great merit, it was not referring so much to his good deeds but rather to his refined intellect. He recognized full well that “there is none besides Him,” and forces such as sorcery were merely illusions that could not trick him. Therefore, he was not afraid in the least.

### The Nefesh HaChaim on This Subject

This also seems to be the position of the Nefesh HaChaim, authored by the great Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin, zy”a. He elaborates on the subject of sorcery and writes the following (3, 12):

“ולכן גם רבי חנינא, לא שבטח על זכות קדושת תורתו ומעשיו המרובים, רק שידע ושיער בנפשו שזאת האמונה קבועה בלבו לאמיתה, שאין עוד מלבדו יתברך שום כח כלל, והדביק עצמו בקדושת מחשבתו לבעל הכוחות כולם, אדון יחיד המלא כל עלמין, ואין כאן שום שליטה ומציאות כח אחר כלל, לכן היה נכון לבו בטוח בזה, שלא ישלטו עליו פעולות הכשפים הנמשכים מכוחות המרכבה טמאה.”

He is also of the opinion that Rabbi Chanina was not relying on the merit of his Torah studies or numerous good deeds but rather on his unwavering knowledge and faith. He believed absolutely in his heart that there is but one Master of the Universe and one all-encompassing force in the world. He clung steadfastly to this knowledge and therefore was certain that acts of sorcery — emanating from the impure, false powers — could do him no harm.

With this understanding, though, we still need to make sense of Rabbi Yochanan’s statement: **“למה נקרא שמן כשפים, שמכחישין פמליא של מעלה”** — why are they called “keshofim,” because they contradict the heavenly family. [Translator’s note: In Hebrew the word “keshofim” can be seen as a contraction of the words “makchishim famalyah” — which means contradicting the family or legion.] As explained, they possess no power whatsoever, since **“אין עוד מלבדו”** -- there is none besides Him! Hence, the Nefesh HaChaim (ibid.) proceeds to address the meaning of the statement that they possess the ability to contradict and alter the heavenly family — referring to the arrangement of heavenly bodies and constellations:

“ומה שכתב שם שמכחישין פמליא של מעלה, רצונו לומר שרק סידור כוחות הפמליא של הכוכבים והמזלות, קבע הבורא יתברך כח בכוחות הטומאה שיהיו יכולין להפכם, אבל לא שיהא בכחם לשנות ח”ו מסדר הפעולות הקדושים של כוחות המרכבה קדושה, ואדרבה כשמשיביעין אותם בשמות של כוחות הקדושה, ממילא כרגע מתבטל כל ענייני פעולתם לגמרי.”

He explains that sorcery is able to alter the order of the astrological forces; however, they are powerless to alter or affect in any way, chas v’shalom, the effects or actions of Hashem or His holy legions, the ministering angels. In fact, as soon as they swear by the names of the forces of kedushoh, their powers are nullified.

The Nefesh HaChaim concludes his discussion of this matter as follows:

“ובאמת הוא ענין גדול וסגולה נפלאה, להסיר ולבטל מעליו כל דינין ורצונות אחרים, שלא יוכלו לשלוט בו ולא יעשו שם רושם כלל, כשהאדם קובע בלבו לאמר, הלא ה’ הוא האלקים האמתי ואין עוד מלבדו יתברך שום כח בעולם, וכל העולמות כלל והכל מלא רק אחדותו הפשוט יתברך שמו, ומבטל בלבו ביטול גמור, ואינו משגיח כלל על שום כח ורצון בעולם, ומשעבד ומדבק טוהר מחשבתו רק לאדון יחיד ב”ה, כן יספיק הוא יתברך בידו שממילא יתבטלו מעליו כל הכוחות והרצונות שבעולם, שלא יוכלו לפעול לו שם דבר כלל.”

It is a wonderful accomplishment to annul the powers and effects of outside forces. As soon as a person establishes in his heart and mind with certainty that Hashem is the one and only G-d and “there is none besides Him,” and he gives no credence to any other entity, all outside influences are thus abolished and rendered ineffectual.

### The Rambam’s Powerful Insight Concerning Hashem’s Supervision of Man

Continuing onward and upward along this exalted path, let us delve deeper into this subject based on an important principle taught by the Rambam in Moreh Nevuchim (3, 51). This principle is so essential that it is incumbent upon every Jew to learn this principle and remember it every minute and every hour of every day. Concerning HKB”H’s supervision of mankind, the Rambam states: **“והנה נגלה — אלי עיון נפלא מאד, יסורו בו ספקות ויתגלו בו סודות אלוהיות”** — a wonderful insight has been revealed to me; it will remove doubts and uncertainties and will help reveal divine secrets.

The gist of his lesson is that HKB”H’s supervision and protection, “Hashgocheh,” of a human being from any ill occurrences depends to a great degree on a person’s intellectual belief in Hashem’s direct supervision. If a person always has Hashem in mind, Hashem will never stop overseeing his life and his actions. Should we see that a tragedy befell a person, it is because he was not connected to Hashem in his thoughts. Here is what the Rambam writes:

“והנה נגלה אלי עיון נפלא מאד, יסורו בו ספקות ויתגלו בו סודות אלוהיות, והוא שאנחנו כבר בארנו בפרקי ההשגחה, כי כפי שיעור שכל כל בעל שכל תהיה ההשגחה בו, והאיש השלם בהשגתו אשר

לא יסור שכלו מהאלוה תמיד, תהיה ההשגחה בו תמיד. והאיש שלם ההשגחה אשר תפנה מחשבתו מהאלוה קצת עתים, תהיה ההשגחה בו בעת חשבו באלוה לבד, ותסור ההשגחה ממנו בעת עסקו.

ולא תסור ממנו אז כסורה ממי שלא ישכיל כלל, אבל תמעט ההשגחה ההיא, אחר שאין לאיש ההוא השלם בהשגתו בעת עסקו שכל בפועל, ואמנם הוא אז משיג בכוח קרוב, והוא דומה בעת ההיא לסופר המהיר בשעה שאינו כותב.

ויהיה מי שלא השכיל האלוה כל עיקר, כמי שהוא בחושך ולא ראה אור כלל, כמו שביארנו באמרו (שמואל א ב-ט) ורשעים בחושך ידמו, ואשר השיג וכוונתו כולה על מושכלו, כמו שהוא באור השמש הבהיר, ואשר השיג והוא מתעסק, דומה בעת עסקו למי שהוא ביום המעונן, שלא תאיר בו השמש מפני העב המבדיל בינה ובינו.

The complete person will always have Hashem in mind; as a result, he will always be supervised from above. When he is engrossed in other matters and forgets of Hashem, Hashem's supervision will be absent temporarily. It will not be entirely absent as it would be from someone who does not believe in or comprehend Hashem's supervision at all; for, this person does believe in Hashem's "Hashgocheh." His divine supervision at that moment will only be diminished.

Someone who does not recognize the presence of G-d and His supervision at all resembles a person living in darkness who has never seen light. Conversely, someone who does appreciate Hashem's "Hashgocheh" resembles a person standing in the bright light of the sun. Thus, he who is aware of Hashem's "Hashgocheh," but has a momentary lapse of focus while engaged in worldly matters, can be compared to a person on a cloudy day — where the cloud temporarily blocks him from the sun.

Next, the Rambam adds an astounding and somewhat frightening thought. He states that anyone who experiences a negative occurrence, be he a prophet or a very devout person, that occurrence was due to a momentary disregard of Hashem's "Hashgocheh":

"ומפני זה יראה לי, כי כל מי שתמצאהו רעה מרעות העולם, מן הנביאים או מן החסידים השלמים, לא מצאוהו הרע ההוא רק בעת השכחה ההיא, ולפי אורך השכחה ההיא או פחיתות הענין אשר התעסק בו יהיה עוצם הרעה... ותהיה השגחת האלוה יתברך מתמדת במי שהגיע לו השפע ההוא, המזומן לכל מי שישתדל להגיע אליו.

ועם הפנות מחשבת האדם והשיגו האלוה יתברך בדרכים האמתיות ושמחתו במה שהשיג, אי אפשר שיקרא אז לאיש ההוא מין ממני הרעות, כי הוא עם האלוה והאלוה עמו, אבל בהסיר מחשבתו מהאלוה, אשר הוא אז נבדל מהאלוה והאלוה נבדל ממנו, והוא אז מזומן לכל רע שאפשר שימצאהו, כי הענין המביא ההשגחה ולהימלט מים המקרה הוא השפע ההוא השכלי."

He states that the magnitude of the negative event is directly related to the length of time and the degree to which he forgot Hashem's "Hashgocheh." In summary, it all boils down to one's ability to remain constantly connected with HKB"H. That connection prevents mishaps; lack of connection opens one up to the possibility of misfortune and disaster.

### The Great Danger Present when in Engaging in Worldly Matters

Based on this introduction, we can appreciate why the Rambam writes that the greatest danger for a person presents itself when he is engaged in worldly matters — such as business or even eating and drinking. At those moments, a person may easily forget, chas v'shalom, his connection with Hashem. Consequently, at those moments, Hashem is no longer with that person. For this very reason, the "chassidim" — the extremely devout—took great care to minimize any temporary lapses concerning their thoughts and connection with Hashem.

We find, in fact, that the possuk in parshas Ekev (Devorim 8, 11) warns us about the significant danger of becoming detached from Hashem while engaged in worldly matters:

"השמר לך פן תשכח את ה' אלקיך... פן תאכל ושבעת ובתים טובים תבנה וישבת, ובקרך וצאנך ירביון, וכסף וזהב ירבה לך וכל אשר לך ירבה, ורם לבבך ושכחת את ה' אלקיך... ואמרת בלבבך כוחי ועצם ידי עשה לי את החיל הזה, וזכרת את ה' אלקיך כי הוא הנותן לך כח לעשות חיל."

"Take care lest you forget Hashem, your G-d, by not observing His commandments, . . . lest you eat and be satisfied, and you build good houses and settle, and your cattle and sheep increase, and you increase silver and gold for yourselves, and everything that you have will increase — and your heart will become haughty and you will forget Hashem, your G-d, Who took you out of the land of Egypt from the house of slavery, . . . And you may say in your heart, 'My strength and the might of my hand made me all this wealth!' Then you shall remember Hashem, your G-d, that it was He Who gave you strength to make wealth."

It is clear as day that the best advice for avoiding this clear and present danger is to follow the guidelines of the Shulchan Oruch (O.C. 231):

"בכל מה שיהנה בעולם הזה, לא יכוין להנאתו אלא לעבודת הבורא יתברך, כדכתיב (משלי ג ו) בכל דרכיך דעהו, ואמרו חכמים (אבות פ"ב מ"ב) כל מעשיך יהיו לשם שמים, שאפילו דברים של רשות, כגון האכילה והשתיה וההליכה... וכל צרכי גופך יהיו כולם לעבודת בוראך או לדבר הגורם עבודתו... ומי שנוהג כן עובד את בוראו תמיד."

No matter what worldly mundane activity we are engaged in, we are advised not to focus on our own pleasure and self-gratification. Rather, even activities necessary for our continued existence in this world should be dedicated to the continued service of Hashem.

In this light, we can appreciate David HaMelech's words (Tehillim 23, 4) as follows: **“גם כי אלך בגיא צלמות לא אירא רע”** — even as I walk in the valley of death, I fear no evil so long as I remain constantly connected with Hashem. Furthermore, David attested to his constant connection and uninterrupted relationship with Hashem: **“שויתי ה' לנגדי תמיד”** — I constantly view myself as standing in the presence of Hashem. Why do I have no fear? **“כי אתה עמדי”** — due to my devotion, HKB”H is always with me — every single moment.

### The Rambam's Principle Appears in the Teachings of the Baal Shem Tov zy”a

This idea of the Rambam's coincides beautifully with a basic tenet of chassidut found in the teachings of the Baal Shem Tov hakadosh, zy”a — as cited by his loyal pupil in Toldos Yaakov Yosef (beginning of parshas Bereishis). He states that even when HKB”H seems most distant and removed — “hester ponim” — so long as a Jew believes wholeheartedly that HKB”H is still with him, it is impossible that any ill will befall him. When HKB”H wishes to punish a person because of his numerous transgressions, He conceals this knowledge from him — that despite the dire appearances, He is ever present.

Based on this idea, he elucidates the following possuk (Devorim 31, 18): **“ואנכי הסתר אסתיר פני מהם ביום ההוא על כל”** — but I will surely conceal My countenance from them on that day because of all the evil that it did, for it turned to other gods. HKB”H specifically says: **“ואנכי הסתר אסתיר פני מהם”** — in other words, I will conceal from them this knowledge that I am in a state of hiding during their time of distress, so that I may punish them for turning to other gods.

Here are the words of the Toldos Yaakov Yosef as quoted by the great Rabbi of Komarna in Leket Imrei Peninim (end of Chumash Devorim) with some additional clarification:

**“שמעתי ממורי, שאם ידע אדם בידיעה ואמונה שלימה, שבכל הסתרות ומחשבות זרות הקב”ה מסתתר שם אין זה הסתרה כלל, כי בידיעה שאדם יודע ומאמין שבכל תנועה והרהור דבר גדול ודבר קטן שם הוא אלופו של עולם חיות אלקות, מיד יתפרדו כל פועלי און והרע נופל למטה, ונתגלה האור וחיות אלקות...”**

**אבל לפעמים ואנכי הסתר אסתיר, שאסתיר גם את ההסתרה, עד שאינו מרגיש שום חיות ואינו יודע ונשכח ממנו שהקב”ה שם אתו, וזה הוא לו כי פנה אל אלהים אחרים, בהסתלקות אמונה ובטחון, ואז חל עונש, אבל כל זמן שהאדם דבוק באמונה שלימה בבוראו, לא יארע לו שום רע אלא אהבה וחיבה.”**

If a person is aware and believes wholeheartedly that even in the most dismal circumstances HKB”H is actually there but in hiding, then the concealment no longer exists. For, with the awareness that the Master of the Universe is indeed there with him, all evil and negative elements disappear and the divine light is revealed.

At times, however, the awareness of My concealed presence must also be concealed, because the person turned to other gods. Consequently, the person forgets that HKB”H is with him, he no longer feels safe and secure, and he is punished.

It seems quite clear that the source for the Baal Shem Tov hakadosh's message is the Rambam's words in Moreh Nevuchim that we introduced above at length. He taught that so long as a person is connected with Hashem in his thoughts, nothing bad can happen to him. Mishaps only occur when a person forgets that Hashem is present and watching.

### “They contradict the heavenly family” so that a Person Will Forget that Everything Is Controlled from Above

Let us now return to Rabbi Yochanan's statement concerning the power of “keshofim,” sorcery: **“למה נקרא שמן כשפים, למנה נקרא שמן כשפים”** — the name “keshofim” derives from the fact that they contradict the arrangement and the actions of the heavenly bodies and constellations. If a person sincerely believes that HKB”H is the one and only force in the universe, and He determines all that transpires, then it becomes clear that sorcery cannot perform any action that opposes Hashem's will.

Nevertheless, man has been given the choice to choose between good and evil. As a consequence, when man pursues riches and the meaningless temptations that abound in this world, an opportunity arises for the forces of tumah to trap him. They obscure the fact that the effects of the heavenly bodies in this world are entirely supervised by Hashem. Rather, they delude a person into believing incorrectly that the heavenly bodies act autonomously according to their own will. When a person falls into this trap and forgets that Hashem is in total control, he causes Hashem's “Hashgocheh” to disappear. This makes him vulnerable to harm by the negative forces.

This then is the meaning of Rabbi Yochanan's statement: **"למה נקרא שמן כשפים, שמכחישין פמליא של מעלה"** — why are they called "keshofim"? Because they contradict the heavenly family. In other words, they distort the true reality, so that they may cause man harm. They distort the fact that everything that happens in the universe is orchestrated by Hashem by means of the heavenly bodies. So, if a person does not fall into their trap and remains steadfast in the correct belief that the stars and constellations possess no power of their own but are merely controlled by Hashem — there is no other besides Him, "ein od milvado" — then they surely are powerless to harm him.

This indeed is the message conveyed by Rabbi Chanina — with his immense level of kedushoh — to the sorceress. He was not concerned at all if she took some of the dust from beneath his feet. For, he was steadfast in his belief that "there is no one else besides Him." Then the Gemoreh poses a question based on Rabbi Yochanan's statement: **"למה נקרא -- שמן כשפים, שמכחישין פמליא של מעלה"** — why are they called "keshofim"? Because they contradict the heavenly family. The Gemoreh answers: **"שאני רבי חנינא דנפיש זכותיה"** — Rabbi Chanina is different because of his great merit. We explained that this did not imply that he relied on the merit of his Torah learning and his mitzvos.

Rather, the Gemoreh's answer is to be understood as explained by the Shem Mi'Shmuel and the Nefesh HaChaim. Rabbi Chanina's faith and confidence in Hashem were so great; his staunch belief that no other force existed besides HKB"H made it so obvious to him that these other forces possessed no true power of their own. Since their ability to harm a person depends on deluding that person into attributing autonomy to the heavenly bodies, Rabbi Chanina had no reason to fear them.

**"But you who cling to Hashem, your G-d — you are all alive today"**

Alas, based on this discussion and in particular based on the words of the Rambam in Moreh Nevuchim, we can explain the significance of the possuk in our parsha: **"ואתם הדבקים -- ואתם הדבקים"** — but you who cling to Hashem, your G-d — you are all alive today. In other words, so long as you cling to Hashem in your thoughts — having faith in Hashem and in His "Hashgocheh"—then you are guaranteed: **"חיים כולכם היום"**—you are all alive today — because Hashem's "Hashgocheh" over a person is dependent on that

person's staying connected with Hashem in his thoughts. As David HaMelech proclaimed: **"גם כי אלך בגיא צלמות לא אירא"** — he was confident that even under the worst of circumstances, no harm would be befall him, because of Hashem's constant presence.

At this point, it is appropriate to introduce what the great Rabbi from Ropshitz, zy"a, wrote in Ayalah Sheluchah (Miketz). Every single person, no matter who he is, must believe firmly that HKB"H will watch over him and protect him. It is vital that he not fall into the yetzer's trap of becoming convinced that his transgressions are so great that he is no longer worthy of Hashem's aid and protection. Here are his words of inspiration:

**"ואם יאמר האדם, מי אנכי שאבא עד הלום שיעזור לי השי"ת, וכי צדקתי יגרום, הלא אנכי ידעתי שאין בי לא תורה ולא מעשים טובים, ואני רשע ולא צדיק ומעשים רעים עשיתי, ועתה מה כוחי כי איחל לתשועות ה', שהוא משלם לאיש כמעשהו, לא יאמר כן כי בודאי הם דברי היצר הרע, שרוצה להטותו ממדת הביטחון ח'".**

**רק אדרבא יחזק את לבו ויאמר טוב ה' לכל, והוא טוב ומטיב לרעים ולטובים, וגם קרוב ה' לכל קוראיו לכל אשר יקראוהו באמת, ולא יכלמו לנצח כל החוסים בו, ולכן נקרא המדה זאת בלשון ביטחון שהוא לשון טיחה ודביקות, והיינו שידבק האדם את לבו ורעיונו תמיד לבטוח בה' באמת ובלב שלם, שבודאי יגמול לו השי"ת בחסדו הגדול השפעות טובות, יותר ממה שראוי לו לפי מעשיו".**

He warns lest a person feel that he lacks adequate Torah learning and good deeds, that he is a rasha and not a tzaddik, that his transgressions are too numerous, that he can no longer expect Hashem's salvation. Each person is judged and rewarded appropriately. One should not entertain such negative thoughts, for they are surely the words of the yetzer hara attempting to weaken his faith and confidence in Hashem, chas v'shalom.

On the contrary, a person should strengthen his resolve and believe that Hashem is benevolent to all — both to those that are good and those that are not. One must believe that Hashem responds and is near to all that call out to Him with sincerity. In fact, the attribute of "bitachon," conveying one's confidence in Hashem, is related to the Hebrew word meaning to plaster; it implies a sense of attachment and closeness. Hence, a person should always be confident and believe with all his heart that HKB"H will surely reward him due to His kindness, above and beyond what he truly deserves.