Dvar Torah Outline

Divine Providence: Ends, Intermediary Events, and Free Will

Abstract

Rabbi Shulman concludes the Ramchal's discussion of individual providence by distinguishing between events that establish a person's intended circumstances and events that serve as steps toward something else. Apparent setbacks may produce unexpected benefits, prevent greater harm, or affect another person's life. He then explains how providence operates alongside free will and why "for the best" means the best opportunity for spiritual growth—not necessarily the most comfortable circumstances.

I

Two Categories of Providential Events

A. *Events that are ends in themselves*

- The Ramchal distinguishes between two kinds of events that happen to a person.
- The first establishes circumstances that Hashem intends the person to experience.
- As discussed earlier in the chapter, these circumstances may reflect:
  - The person's assigned role and challenges.
  - Ancestral merit or the merit of future descendants.
  - Connections to other people and the surrounding community.
- Wealth, hardship, assistance, and other conditions can all constitute an intended setting for serving Hashem.

B. *Events that function as intermediaries*

- The second category consists of events whose purpose is to bring about another event.
- Their immediate effect is not the ultimate point; they are a means of reaching an intended outcome.
- Rabbi Shulman emphasizes that an event's significance may therefore be invisible when it first occurs.

II

Thanking Hashem for an Apparent Setback

2:00

A. *The verse and its Talmudic interpretation*

- **Isaiah 12:1:** > וְאָמַרְתָּ בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא אוֹדְךָ ה' כִּי אָנַפְתָּ בִּי יָשָׁב אַפְּךָ וּתְנַחֲמֵנִי: > (You will say on that day: "I thank You, Hashem, for though You were angry with me, Your anger has turned away, and You have comforted me.")
- The Ramchal invokes the Talmud's interpretation: a person may ultimately thank Hashem for the very setback that initially caused distress.

B. *The broken leg and the buried treasure*

- A person's cow breaks its leg while plowing.
- While attending to the animal, the owner discovers a treasure beneath it.
- Initially, the injury appears to be a serious financial loss.
- Once the treasure is discovered, the same event is understood as the means through which substantial wealth arrived.

C. *The change in perspective*

- From the owner's perspective, the distressing event becomes a welcome step toward something much better.
- The example illustrates why the immediate appearance of an event does not reveal its ultimate purpose.

III

Why Use an Intermediary at All? The Limits of Human Understanding

3:00

A. *The deeper question remains*

- Rabbi Shulman asks: Could Hashem not have delivered the treasure without injuring the cow?
- Certainly He could have.
- Discovering the beneficial outcome therefore explains the event's practical role, but does not fully explain why Hashem chose that particular route.

B. *Divine wisdom extends beyond the visible chain of events*

- The particular means must also reflect Hashem's wisdom and the considerations discussed earlier in the chapter.
- Human beings may understand that one event led to another without knowing why that precise sequence was necessary.

C. *The Ramchal's ocean analogy*

- Rabbi Shulman cites the Ramchal's comparison:
  - In the World to Come, a person's questions about what happened will be clarified.
  - Nevertheless, the infinite depth of divine wisdom will remain beyond human comprehension.
- Seeing the entire surface of an ocean does not mean comprehending all its depths and hidden currents.
- Likewise, receiving satisfying answers does not mean grasping every dimension of Hashem's reasoning.

D. *An intermediary is not simply two independent outcomes*

- A participant suggests that perhaps the broken leg provides atonement while the treasure supplies a separate reward.
- Rabbi Shulman distinguishes that possibility from the category being discussed:
  - If each event independently fulfills an intended purpose, they are two end-goal events.
  - An intermediary, by contrast, is understood here as a step toward the other event.
- Merely assigning separate purposes to both events does not explain their relationship as **means and end**.

IV

Protective Delays and Events That Affect Other People

8:00

A. *Missing a ship that later sinks*

- The Ramchal offers another example:
  - A person is delayed and misses a ship he intended to board.
  - The ship subsequently sinks.
- What initially appears to be an unfortunate disruption turns out to have saved his life.

B. *Two forms of benefit*

- The examples illustrate different outcomes:
  - **Acquiring something good:** the broken leg leads to treasure.
  - **Avoiding something bad:** the delay prevents a fatal journey.
- In both cases, the initial setback serves a purpose beyond its immediate appearance.

C. *The question of the chosen means still applies*

- Rabbi Shulman again notes that Hashem could have protected the traveler another way.
- Knowing that the delay saved him does not reveal why this particular method was chosen.

D. *One person's event may serve another person's circumstances*

- An intermediary event need not primarily concern the person experiencing it.

- Something that appears to have little lasting significance in one person's life may bring benefit or harm to someone else.
- Individual lives are therefore interconnected within divine providence.

E. *Both outcomes and pathways are precisely governed*

- The Ramchal concludes that divine wisdom determines:
  - Which circumstances a person should encounter.
  - The means through which those circumstances will arise.
- Rabbi Shulman emphasizes that neither the destination nor the route is outside Hashem's precise judgment.
- This completes the chapter's discussion of individual providence.

V

Providence and Free Will: Two Directions of Influence

12:00

A. *The question*

- A participant asks how orchestrated events can coexist with human free will.
- If Hashem arranges a person's delays, opportunities, and movements, what remains for the person to choose?

B. *Human choice: influence from below to above*

- Rabbi Shulman describes free will as the person's moral and religious action reaching upward.
- Human choices affect the higher spiritual worlds and change what circumstances are appropriate for that person.

C. *Providence: influence from above to below*

- Hashem continually adjusts a person's circumstances in response to the relevant considerations.
- Examples include:
  - Employment and financial resources.
  - Marriage and family.
  - Health and illness.
  - Opportunities, limitations, and obstacles.
- These circumstances establish the setting within which the person must now choose how to serve Hashem.

D. *Intermediary events introduce no new free-will problem*

- Rabbi Shulman explains that the same distinction already applies to providence generally.

- The only new point is that an event may lead to another event rather than itself establish the intended circumstances.
- Whether a delay is an intended obstacle or a means of preventing another event, it belongs to the providential arrangement of a person's situation.

E. *Serving Hashem from a new position*

- Rabbi Shulman presents providence as an ongoing process of **repositioning**:
  - A person serves Hashem within one set of circumstances.
  - Hashem places the person in a new situation.
  - The person must now serve Him from that new position.
- An intermediary event is a move that leads to a further move, rather than the final setting in which the person is meant to remain.

VI

What "For the Best" Really Means

15:30

A. *Intermediaries are not limited to happy reversals*

- A participant notes that both examples involve apparent misfortune leading to good.
- Rabbi Shulman explains that the principle can also operate in reverse:
  - Something initially pleasant may lead to a difficult outcome.
- The positive examples reflect the verse and Talmudic interpretation being discussed; they do not exhaust the category.

B. *"Best" does not mean most comfortable*

- Another participant asks whether divine repositioning is always for the better.
- Rabbi Shulman distinguishes between:
  - The most pleasant or comfortable circumstances.
  - The circumstances best suited to a person's spiritual task and ultimate good.
- A more difficult job or another apparent decline may still provide the appropriate setting for growth.

C. *The personal-trainer analogy*

- A skilled trainer knows which exercises will develop a person's strength.
- The exercise may be demanding precisely because it is productive.
- Similarly, Hashem knows the details of a person's character and which challenges can help develop that person's spiritual capacities.

D. *Ultimate good must leave room for earning it*

- Rabbi Shulman identifies a basic principle of faith:
  - Hashem is good and seeks our ultimate good.
  - He nevertheless allows us to earn that good through our choices.
- The best circumstances are therefore those suited to helping a person meet the challenge and attain the greatest possible reward in the World to Come.

E. *Our response influences what follows*

- Providence does not end the process of choice.
- How a person responds to the present situation helps determine the next stage.
- Rabbi Shulman compares this to fulfilling a role:
  - Success may lead to advancement.
  - Failure affects what comes next.
- Human choice and divine repositioning thus remain in continuing interaction.

VII

In Summary

- **Events may be destinations or pathways:** Some establish intended circumstances; others lead to a later event.
- **First impressions are incomplete:** A loss may bring unexpected benefit or prevent greater harm.
- **Understanding an outcome is not understanding everything:** Even when a benefit becomes clear, Hashem's choice of means may remain beyond us.
- **Providence encompasses interconnected lives:** An event affecting one person may serve a purpose in someone else's life.
- **Free will operates within providential circumstances:** Hashem establishes the setting; the person chooses how to serve Him within it.
- **"For the best" means ultimate spiritual good:** The goal is not maximum comfort, but the opportunity to grow, choose well, and earn lasting reward.