

Shul Chronicles #59

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SUPER-BOWL AND SUPER-QUESTIONS A MUNDANE GAME BRINGS HEAVENLY QUESTIONS

When I worked for the state as a chaplain in the NYS penitentiary system I was allowed to make my own schedule. This meant that the inmates would not know which day I would be coming, rather an announcement would go out when I arrived that the rabbi is here and that all Jewish inmates should go to his office if they would like to meet with him. Because of such impromptu visitation I had no appointment ledger rather, when I came, it was first come first served.

On one such day I noticed that there were more people waiting outside my office than usual. After a few private one-on-ones I heard several chairs move at once and looked up to see five large, menacing looking men walk into my office. They were clearly not Jewish. This much I can say, “I was not *not* scared”.

I waited for them to speak first, as I was not about to say the wrong thing.

“Rabbi”, their foreman began, “if we ask you a question to you promise us to tell the truth?”

“Of course” I guardedly replied.

“Well Rabbi, you are a man of Gd and therefore you have access to information that common folk and criminals like us do not...”

‘Where was this going?’ I wondered to myself.

“...[W]e need you to tell us something, and we promise not to share it with anyone else: Who is going to win the Super-Bowl tonight?”

In prison, like on the outside, there is a lot riding on this game. While prisoners do not have cash on hand to gamble, they do bet with cigarettes and, sometimes, contraband.

I explained that if I indeed had such powers I would use it to benefit myself and not them, and I would then be a very wealthy man who likely would not be in a prison office on a Sunday afternoon.

But their question is, in fact, an interesting one. Is there *hashgacha pratis* (direct Divine intervention) on such events? In fact, I find, that I receive many, varied unique inquiries this time of year. Many questions I am asked relate to kashrus, especially considering that many of the foods traditionally served by football games had their birth in Buffalo (eg. Buffalo Wings, Beef on Weck, etc.): “May *parve* chili in a *Milk* pot be served with Buffalo Chicken Wings?” (Possibly) “Is it feasible to *kasherize* a deep fryer?” (Best to avoid) “May an *avel* (mourner) attend a ‘Super-Bowl Party’?” (No) “Is it permissible to gamble on sporting events?” (Beyond the scope of this column).

Due to space, I will focus chiefly on the first issue: Is there *hashgacha pratis* on such arbitrary events? Can one, then, *daven* for ‘their’ team to win?

We are well aware that it is a principle of our faith that in addition to believing in the Gd described in the Torah and our writings we must also believe that He is directly involved in, and has control of, this world; that He is a *mashgiach* of His world. In addition to

being listed in his 13 *yesodos* found in his introduction to *perek chelek*, in *Hilchos Teshuva* (3:7) the Rambam (Maimonides) *halachikly* codifies one who does not believe this as a “*min*”.

We also know that there exist two types of *hashgacha*: *hashgacha klalis* and *hashgach pratis*, general vs. exact (or surgical) management and stewardship. How to define these two concepts, as well as understanding when *Hashem* employs each one is a fundamental and controversial issue.

Briefly, while the Rambam (*Moreh Nevuchim* 3:17) explains –in contrast to the generally taught, and perhaps accepted, *hashkafa* –that Hashem “does **not** direct each leaf that falls...” or rules from on-high that a certain big fish shall eat a smaller fish, this speaks only of a *domeim* (inanimate objects), *tzomeich* (plant life, growing organisms) and a *chay* (living creatures other than Man). Events that affect Mankind, however, have, generally, Gd’s *hashgacha pratis*. Famously, many (*Gra [Yahal Ohr]*, *Baal Shem Tov* [see *shut Minchas Elazar* 1:20], et al.) argue and seek to prove that Gd in fact does control with *hashgacha pratis*, for example, the falling of each leaf or that *teva* (nature) itself is controlled by *hashgacha pratis*. Either way, it would seem that the Super-Bowl, which is played by and affects Man would be under *Hashem*’s direct stewardship. Furthermore, there is an additional idea termed “*keilim*” (see *Michtav M’Eliyahu* 2:p.75 and *Derech Hashem [Ramchal]* 2:3:7 “*nikashar*”) where even if one (or a team for that matter) does not deserve something and especially in an event that *Hashem* about which should not be concerned, should in fact *we be* affected then a special *hashgacha* can be activated. (The classic example is before *Hashem* chooses to end someone’s life He must consider all those that may be affected by the loss, thusly, at times, saving the man due to the merits of others. One can then argue that there are few other mundane events that such a multitude of people have a direct financial and emotional interest in –for better or worse - like the Super-Bowl. However, even this is not a zero-sum game. The *pasuk* states (*Yirmiyahu* 17:7) “*Baruch hagever asher yivtach Bashem, V’haya Hashem mivtacho*” (Blessed is the person who trusts Gd, and Gd will fulfill his trust) this alludes to a concept mentioned by the *rishonim* (see *Rabbeinu Bachaya* in *Chovos Halvovos*,

beg. *Shar HaBitochon*; Ramban, *Iyov*, 36:7 "...abandoned (by Gd) to chance..."). For instance, should a man invest in and trust in the stock-market while leaving Gd out of the equation then indeed *Hashem* will force him to play the stock market; he will be bound by those rules. However, the more one puts his trust in *Hashem* then the more *hashgacha* he will find in his life. A related idea is found in the name of the *Kotzker Rebbe*. When the snake was punished with having to crawl on its belly and eat dust (*Bereishis*, 3:14), was this not a gift? After all, all of its food, what it will desire, will be for the ready! Explains the *Kotzker* that there is no greater punishment then having *Hashem* say "Here is all you need; now I do not have to hear your prayers". Compare this to the *Imihos* where the *gemera* (*Yevamus 64a*) explains their difficulty in bearing children as *Hashem's* desire for their prayers and their putting their faith in Him. In other words, sometimes, and with great irony, *Hashem* reminds us through nature that nature is dangerous to rely on without Him.

In addition to the *hashgacha* issue if the *bechira* (free-will) issue. Would not a team playing better than the other dictate, or at least add to, the outcome? There is a natural tension between the fundamental belief in *bechira chafshis* and the central idea of the *hashgacha* from *Hashem* ("All is in the hands of heaven..." *Berachos* 33b). Can one harm or hit another should they so choose regardless of the other's deserving of the pain from on-high? If yes, what of the idea that all comes from Hashem? If not, what about the idea of Free will? In order for *bechira* to be real would not, then, *Hashem* need to 'surrender' some control to us?

This too is debated. The *Ohr HaChaim Hakodesh* has a most unique approach where he explains that indeed, at times, it is a person and not *Hashem* that could affect another's fate! Using this thesis, he explains several events in *Sefer Beresihis*, in particular elements in the story of *Yosef* (*Joseph*)¹ (see his commentary to 37:21 and 44:18; see also *Zohar*, *Vayeshev* p.185. This also seems to be the view of the *Rambam*. Cf. *Vilna Gaon*

¹ See this writer's Shabbos Shuva Drasha from 2006 for a thorough analysis of the story of *Yosef* and his sale through the thesis of the *Ohr Hachaim* and how it directly relates to the idea of asking "*mechila*" from our friends for having wronged them and other issues of the High Holidays.

as brought in *kisvei kodesh R' Yosef Zundel of Salant* p.112 who, after indicating that the *Ohr Hachaim's* approach had been accepted by the masses, strongly disagrees and states that *nothing* can happen to man without a decree from on-high).

These are important questions and the reader is urged to speak to their *mashpiah*. I highly recommend to the learned reader a wonderful *kuntrus* on this topic: *Chemda Geniza* by Rabbi Halperin of Lakewood.

From all of the above we see that while certainly *Hashem* may choose to intervene in something as seemingly insignificant as the Super-Bowl there is also reason to say that Hashem may choose to allow 'nature' to run its course.

Legend has it that in 1795 when the young Menechem Mendel Morgenstorn (later to become the *Kotzker Rebbe*) was 7 years old he was asked, "Where is Hashem?" His famous reply?

"Wherever we let Him in"