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THE LIMITS OF RELIGIOUS OPTIMISM: THE *HAZON ISH* AND THE ALTER OF NOVARDOK ON *BITTAHON*¹

I. INTRODUCTION

The definition of *bittahon* championed by the *Hazon Ish*, R. Abraham Isaiah Karelitz, and currently preferred in Lithuanian yeshiva circles is simply: “trust in God.” For them, *bittahon* is the conviction that all events, be they welcome or not, are the will of God. This concept differs from faith, *emuna*, only in its application. *Emuna* is the theoretical belief in the existence of God and His governance in worldly events, while *bittahon* is the ability to act in accordance with that belief. For example, a butcher who believes that his livelihood is ultimately provided by God has *emuna*. However, if he panics when another butcher shop opens nearby, then he does not have *bittahon*. *Bittahon* entails the ability to remain calm in threatening situations – solaced by the knowledge that the outcome will be the inescapable will of God. Nonetheless, *bittahon* remains a function of *emuna*, and since *emuna* does not dictate absolutely favorable results, *bittahon* does not assume them.

It is apparent that the *Hazon Ish* is formulating his view in opposition to a widespread, or even traditional, alternative approach which defines *bittahon* as “reliance upon God.” According to the traditional approach, intense and unwavering trust in God can produce favorable results. The argument for this version is as follows: God is inherently good; He controls all events; therefore, trusting in Him should lead to favorable outcomes. In comparison to the first approach, where *bittahon* is a function of *emuna*, this second description of *bittahon* asserts more.

¹ I wish to thank all of the reviewers of this essay for their comments, and specifically R. Shalom Carmy and R. Hillel Goldberg who were particularly generous with their time and expertise.

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The distinctive character of *bittahon* put forth by this view requires its own investigation.

We will maintain that both sides in this debate are legitimate. Both approaches have valid sources, medieval and more contemporary, and both have, at least historically, been adopted in practice by certain segments of the broader Jewish community. All too often, though not without reason, we have become dismissive of divergent views on *hashkafa*, Jewish thought, which has resulted in a mounting narrow-mindedness regarding *bittahon*. While it is indisputable that the first version of *bittahon*, in theory and in practice, resonates better within the contemporary Jewish community, this essay will make the argument that there is no basis for belittling the other.

II. THE MITSVA OF BITTAHON

The Biblical sources for the obligation to have *bittahon* may already reflect these two schools of thought. While the passages in Tanakh frequently recommend *bittahon*, as in *Isaiah* 26:3, *Psalms* 37:3, and *Proverbs* 3:5, the standard lists of 613 commandments compiled by *Rishonim* do not list an independent mitsva of *bittahon*. Their silence may indicate that they view *bittahon* not as an independent principle but rather as an organic outgrowth of *emuna*, which is counted as a mitsva by Rambam.² When the *Hazon Ish*, writes “*emuna* and *bittahon* are one ... *emuna* is the theory, and *bittahon* is the practice,”³ he may very well have held that the norm of *bittahon* is subsumed under the commandment of *emuna*.

Other authorities connect *bittahon* to other *mitsvot*. R. Jonah Gerondi⁴ states that the mitsva of *bittahon* is derived from the specific directive given to soldiers to trust in God and not fear bodily harm in battle (*Deut.* 17:7, 20:1).⁵ R. Eliezar Azikri asserts⁶ that the obligation of

² *Sefer ha-Mitsvot*, Mitsva 1

³ *Emuna u-Bittahon*, (Bnei Brak 1997) p. 15.

⁴ *Sha'arei Teshuva*, *sha'ar* 3 sec. 31-32; see also, *Sefer ha-Hinnukh*, Mitsva 525.

⁵ However, see *Ramban*, Commentary to *Sefer ha-Mitsvot* of *Rambam*, Negative Commandments No. 58, who argues that the verses cited by R. Jonah and *Sefer ha-Hinnukh* are not directives but assurances. [See also R. Y.Y. Kanievsky, *Birkhat Perets* (Bnei Brak, 1990) p. 70]. Even *Rambam*, *Sefer ha-Mitsvot* ad loc. who enumerates this prohibition would presumably not be amenable to the assertion of R. Jonah and *Sefer ha-Hinnukh* because in *Rambam's* other description of this prohibition, *Mishneh Torah*, *Hil. Melakhim* 7:15, he restricts this verse to the war theatre itself. [See also R. Meir Simha ha-Kohen of Dvinsk, *Meshekh Hokhma*, *Deut.* 20:3].

⁶ *Sefer ha-Haredim*, 1:21.

wholehearted *bittahon* is implied by the verse, “You shall be whole with the Lord your God” (Deut 18:13), as he writes: “From this we can derive the *mitsva* to trust in God with all one’s heart.” Additionally, R. Meir Simha of Dvinsk, *Meshekh Hokhmah*, Deut. 10:20, claims that the *mitsva*, “and to Him you shall cling” (Deut. *ad loc.*), is expressed through *bittahon* in God’s protection and abilities. These authorities, in contrast with the *Hazon Ish*, presumably did not define *bittahon* as no more no less than *emuna*.

III. THE TRADITIONAL VIEW OF BITTAHON

The plain meaning of many rabbinic sources supports the traditional view. *Yalkut Shimoni*⁷ comments on the verse, “In You, Lord I take refuge, let me never be put to confusion” (*Psalms* 71:1), that, “we see from here that whoever trusts in God will be saved.” Rashi comments there, “even if difficulty looms, trust in the name of God because He will save you.” Similarly, when the verse states, “And they that know Your name will put their trust in You, for You, Lord, have not forsaken those who seek You” (*Psalms* 9:11), *Yalkut Shim’oni*⁸ adds, “And they ... will put their trust in You - based on what? Because You, Lord, have not forsaken those who seek You.” Similarly, commenting on the verse, “I will say of the Lord, who is my refuge and my fortress - my God, in Him I will trust” (*Psalms* 91:2), *Yalkut Shim’oni*⁹ states, “If you trust in My name, your life will stand for you.” In these instances, a literal reading of *Yalkut Shim’oni* clearly indicates that full *bittahon* is guaranteed to be effective in achieving salvation.

Maharal¹⁰ notes that this version of *bittahon* is also the underlying premise of a number of episodes in the Talmud. For instance, *Berakhot* 60b states:

A person should always be accustomed to say, “Whatever the Merciful One does, He does for the best.” In this vein, the story is told that R. Akiva was once traveling along the road, and when he reached a certain city he requested lodging, but no one provided him with shelter. He said, “Whatever the Merciful One does, He does for the best,” and he went to sleep in the field. At the time, he had with him a rooster, a donkey,

⁷ *Psalms*, sec. 714

⁸ *Psalms*, sec. 643

⁹ *Psalms*, sec. 842.

¹⁰ R. Judah Loew, *Netivot Olam, Netiv ha-Bittahon*.

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and a lamp. The wind came and blew out the lamp, a cat came and ate the rooster, and a lion came and ate the donkey. R. Akiva said, “Whatever the Merciful One does, He does for the best.” That very night an army came and captured the city. R. Akiva said, “Did I not tell you, whatever the Merciful One does, He does for the best!”

Maharal explains that “when he [R. Akiva] came to the town, he was included in the decree ... and therefore R. Akiva said ‘Whatever the Merciful One does etc.’ This means that he had *bittabon* that all that happened to him was for the best, and because of his *bittabon* the event became favorable.” According to Maharal, R. Akiva’s mantra, “Whatever the Merciful One does, He does for the best,” is quite literal; through complete *bittabon*, a genuine misfortune can become immediately, visibly, and objectively favorable. Maharal observes that this corresponds with a literal reading of the philosophy of Nahum Ish Gam Zu, that “This, too, is for the best,” as recorded by the Talmud, *Ta’anit* 21a:

One time, the Jews wanted to send a gift to the court of the Caesar. They said: Who should go? Let Nahum Ish Gam Zu go ... They sent with him a chest filled with precious stones and pearls. He went and spent a night in a certain residence. During the night the residents arose, emptied the gems from the chest and filled it with dirt ... When he arrived at the palace, they opened the chest and saw it was full of dirt. The emperor wanted to kill them ... He [Nahum Ish Gam Zu] said, “This, too, is for the best.” Elijah came and appeared to the Caesar as one of his officials and said, “Perhaps this dirt is from their father Abraham, which turns into swords when thrown at any enemy.” There was one city the Romans had not been able to conquer, so they tested some of the dirt against the city and they conquered it. They subsequently went to the treasure vault and filled the chest with precious stones and pearls and sent him [Nahum Ish Gam Zu] off with great honor.

Maharal concludes that the essence of these episodes illustrate the role of *bittabon*: “How powerful is the trait of *bittabon*, that when one trusts in God with all his heart so that all the events which happen to him are considered favorable – as with R. Akiva and Nahum Ish Gam Zu – ... and when one trusts in Him, then it is upon God to save him.”

The Talmud ascribes this brand of *bittabon* to Hillel the Elder as well. *Berakhot* 60a tells the story that upon returning from a trip abroad, Hillel heard shrieking emanating from his town, and he expressed unshakable certainty that the calamity was not in his own home. This form of extreme confidence can best be understood in light of the preceding view of

bittahon.¹¹ Additionally, *Beitsa* 16a records that Shamai would set aside for Shabbat any food that came into his possession during the week, while Hillel would only begin to worry about fare for Shabbat once it became closer to the weekend because he had fearless *bittahon* that God would provide for all his needs.¹²

IV. PROPONENTS OF THE TRADITIONAL VIEW

This vision of *bittahon*, bolstered by a plain reading of the previous sources and underscored by Maharal, is supported by a passage in the first chapter of the essay, *ha-Emuna ve-ha-Bittahon*, a work originally attributed to Ramban but presently ascribed to another Geronese kabbalist of the same school, R. Jacob ben Sheshet.¹³ The author of *Ha-Emuna ve-ha-Bittahon* initially characterizes Jacob's fear prior to his encounter with Esau (Gen32:8) as representing a lack of *bittahon*. He writes,

Whoever has *bittahon* has *emuna* ... but not all who have *emuna* have *bittahon* because sometimes he will be afraid of retribution for a sin ... and because he considers himself a sinner ... he does not bring himself to trust that God will save him ... similar to Jacob our father of blessed memory ... but one who has *bittahon* is not afraid even of retribution.

¹¹ In recognition of the realities of hardship and failure, Maharal questions Hillel's extreme confidence and total lack of fear; he therefore distinguishes between sudden catastrophic events as opposed to gradual misfortunes. Maharal claims that Hillel was only confident that a cataclysmic incident could not have happened in his own home, but even Hillel was susceptible to a natural, gradually developing misfortune. According to this explanation, the traditional view of *bittahon* is not to be supported by Hillel's reaction at all. However, Maharal fails to note Hillel's practice regarding Sabbath preparations, which cannot be explained in light of this distinction. Therefore, I have presented a more basic interpretation of Hillel's view which is supported by R. Isaac Volozhiner, *Peh Kadosh*, as cited below.

¹² The author of the *Mishna Berura* 250:2 cites many authorities who accept Shamai's practice as normative while reserving Hillel's system for those who possess extraordinary *bittahon*. Disagreeing with Rashi's comments on Ex. 20:7, which ostensibly reflect the opinion of Shamai, Ramban, in his comments on Ex. 20:8, stresses that the halakha is in fact in accordance with Hillel the Elder.

¹³ *Ha-Emuna ve-ha-Bittahon* is currently printed in R. Hayyim David Chavel's *Kitvei ha-Ramban*, (Jerusalem, 1964), vol. 1, p. 353. As to the authorship of this work, see R. Chavel, p. 341, and G. Scholem *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1946) p. 355, n. 28. If *ha-Emuna ve-ha-Bittahon* is indeed a work of Ramban, perhaps there is added significance to Ramban's declaration in his commentary to Ex. 20:8 (cited in the previous note) that the halakha is in accordance with Hillel the Elder.

Ha-Emuna ve-ha-Bittahon apparently believes that a byproduct of absolute *bittahon* is not only the calming of fear but the negation of fear entirely, most likely because the author understands that *bittahon*, when utilized fully, assures completely favorable results.¹⁴

Aside from the author of *ha-Emuna ve-ha-Bittahon* and Maharal, this traditionalist view of *bittahon* has a number of other prominent proponents. The medieval Jewish philosopher R. Joseph Albo writes,

But he does not trust completely that he will be given what is in his heart, whatever he will ask, for he does not view himself as being on the spiritual level that God should do him *hesed*; he thinks God does not want to grant his request, and because of this he does not hope properly. However, if he had hoped properly, the *hesed* would not have been withheld by God.¹⁵

R. Hayyim Vital,¹⁶ the 16th century kabbalist also states, “*bittahon* - there is no greater trait ... and it states ‘Blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord and whose hope is the Lord’ (Jeremiah 17:7), and he is promised that he will not be lacking sustenance, as it says, ‘Cast your burden upon the Lord and he shall sustain you’ (*Psalms* 55:23), on the condition that it be in truth, with all his heart, and without hesitation.”

In more recent times, R. Hayyim Volozhiner¹⁷ has written that if one who is confronted with imminent danger focuses all his concentration on the verse “there is none else beside Him” (Deut. 4:35), he will undoubtedly be saved.¹⁸ This type of unqualified assurance can only be justified by the traditional view of *bittahon*. R. Hayyim’s son and successor, R. Isaac

¹⁴ This understanding of *ha-Emuna ve-ha-Bittahon* is presented by R. Joseph Horowitz, *Madregat ha-Adam* (Jerusalem 1976) p. 206. In truth, in later paragraphs of the same essay, *ha-Emuna ve-ha-Bittahon* implies otherwise [as is noted by R. Avraham Ya’akov Goldberg, *Bittahon Ish*, (Jerusalem 2002) p. 93]. However, in establishing *ha-Emuna ve-ha-Bittahon*’s position, I believe preference should be given to his explicit statements over his vague insinuations. It should be noted that R. Elhanan Wasserman, *Kovets Ma’amarim* (Jerusalem 1991), p. 21, maintains that Rambam, in his, Introduction to *Avot* Ch. 7, is also critical of Jacob, echoing this view of *bittahon* as well. This is hard to accept given Rambam’s general view of *bittahon* and the fact that his comments can be explained more innocuously in light of R. Jonah’s assertion (cited below) that *bittahon* is applicable even to the undeserving.

¹⁵ *Sefer ha-Ikrim* 4:47.

¹⁶ *Sha’arei Kedusha* 2:4.

¹⁷ *Nefesh ha-Hayyim*, Gate 3, ch. 12.

¹⁸ Regarding this specific comment of R. Hayyim Volozhiner, see R. Shimon Yosef Meller, *The Brisker Rav*, p. 390. R. Hayyim Volozhiner’s attitude towards *bittahon* is also reflected in an anecdotal story recorded in his biography by Dov Eliach, *Avi ha-Yeshivot*, (Jerusalem 1991), p. 225.

Volozhiner¹⁹ also writes, “one who has *bittahon* with his whole heart is not afraid of bad tidings, and has no worries, and the *bittahon* itself is the reason he is saved from misfortune. This is the meaning of the gemara regarding Hillel who was returning from abroad ... because in truth, for those with understanding, the required form of *bittahon* is to trust that God will protect him from all forms of punishment; therefore, because his *bittahon* is strong, God will protect him from all misfortune. This was the case with Hillel as well – when he realized that he was not afraid, through *bittahon*, he knew that it (the misfortune) was certainly not in his home.”

R. Aryeh Pomerantsik²⁰ purports that R. Hayyim Soloveichik also expressed this approach to *bittahon* while explaining the verse, “But I have trusted in Your mercy, my heart shall rejoice in Your salvation, I will sing to the Lord for He has dealt bountifully with me” (*Psalms* 13:6). R. Hayyim explained that the phrase, “I shall rejoice in God’s salvation” is at the initial point of *bittahon*; since salvation is sure to come, premature rejoicing is appropriate.²¹ Only the external exhilaration of, “I will sing to the Lord,” is out of place before the deliverance has indeed arrived. R. Hayyim’s son, R. Yitshak Zev Soloveichik²² states this even more explicitly: “the verse testifies that through *bittahon* it is possible to attain anything, as it states, ‘Delight in the Lord; and He shall give you the desires of your heart’ (*Psalms* 37:4). The explanation is that if a man’s *bittahon* will be so strong that it will cause him delight, then he will be granted all that his heart desires...in accordance with the level of his *bittahon* will be his compensation from God.”

Dov Katz²³ records that this attitude towards *bittahon* was also a principal element of the 19th century *musar* movement. In Eliezer Rivlin’s biography of R. Zundel of Salant there appears letter that was sent from R. Zundel to his son in which he writes, “for this is the secret of *bittahon*, that God performs the will of the person who trusts in Him with a full heart, and provides him with all his needs in every place and every time.”²⁴ While it should be noted that R. Zundel’s disciple, R. Yisrael Salanter,

¹⁹ *Peh Kadosh*, (Jerusalem: Makhon Moreshet Ha-Yeshivot, 1994), p.235.

²⁰ *Emek Berakhah*, (Jerusalem 1990) p. 125.

²¹ According to R. Pomerantsik, R. Hayyim statement was limited to the following two situations, “if a prophet will come in the name of God, and say that God will perform a miracle, or if you will find someone who has absolute *bittahon*, *bittahon* one hundred percent that certainly God will perform this miracle for him.” The latter of the two scenarios is the one which is relevant to the present discussion.

²² *Hiddushei Maran Riz ha-Levi al ha-Torah* (Jerusalem 1981) p. 53.

²³ *Tenu’at ha-Mussar* (Tel Aviv: 1945) vol. 1 p. 122-125, 320.

²⁴ *Ha-Tsaddik R. Yosef Zundel mi-Salant* (Jerusalem: Bene Eliezer Rivlin 1982) p. 26. The translation of this statement was taken from Immanuel Etkes, *Rabbi*

does not echo this outlook on *bittahon* in any of his writings,²⁵ based on the volume and undisputed nature of the anecdotal stories and quotations implicating him with this view, there is little doubt that this was indeed his position as well.²⁶ Among the leaders of the *musar* movement, this view of *bittahon* has been particularly advocated by, and associated with, the Alter of Novardok, R. Joseph Yoizel Horowitz, who made it a cornerstone of his philosophy.²⁷

Even though R. J. Zwi Werblowski writes that there is no systematic Hasidic doctrine of *bittahon*,²⁸ there are references to this understanding of *bittahon* in the Hasidic literature as well. Rivka Schatz Uffenheimer observes that while the early Hasidic leader R. Dov Ber, the Maggid of Mezritch, promoted a form of *bittahon* that was closely tied to *emuna* – perhaps similar to that of the *Hazon Ish* – this philosophy was abandoned by Hasidism’s heirs. Uffenheimer notes the remark of the Maggid’s student, R. Levi Yitshak of Berdichev, who stated that, “and because their *bittahon* was so great then certainly God would perform salvation for them,”²⁹ upon which Uffenheimer comments, “The attribute of *bittahon* is thus transformed here into a power forcing the laws of nature to submit to human will.”³⁰ Much later, R. Kalonimus Kalmish Shapiro of Piaseczno³¹ and R. Menahem M. Schneerson³² also stressed *bittahon*’s ability to grant specified favorable results. R. Schneerson’s description is highlighted by the following

Israel Salanter and the Mussar Movement, (Jerusalem: The Jewish Publication Society, 1993) p. 61.

²⁵ This observation is made by R. Shlomo Wolbe, as quoted by R. Avraham Ya’akov Goldberg, *Bittahon Ish*, (Jerusalem 2002) p. 83.

²⁶ See, for example, Katz, p. 320, Eliach, p. 227, Hayyim Zaichyk, *Me’erot ha-Gedolim*, (Jerusalem 1969), sec. 158, and R. Goldberg p. 83-4.

²⁷ *Madreigat ha-Adam* (Jerusalem 1976), p. 181-225. R. J. Zwi Werblowski, “Faith, Hope, and Trust: A Study in the Concept of *Bittahon*,” *Papers of the Institute of Jewish Studies London* (1964), p. 136, writes that R. Horowitz “combined these virtues to an extraordinary degree. As a “practical hermit” he equals the stature of St. Teresa; he used to sign after his name the letters BB (ie. *ba’al bittahon*).”

²⁸ Werblowski ad loc. p. 138.

²⁹ *Kedushat Levi* (Jerusalem 1958), p. 117.

³⁰ *Hasidism as Mysticism*, Trans. by Jonathan Chipman (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1993), pp. 86-88.

³¹ *Esh Kodesh* (Jerusalem: Va’ad Haside Piazesne), p. 55. See Pesach Schindler, *Hasidic Responses to the Holocaust in the Light of Hasidic Thought*, (Hoboken, NJ: Ktav Pub. House, 1990), who examines the position of R. Shapiro more fully.

³² *Likkutei Sibot, Parshat Shemot* 1991. See also R. Schneerson, *Torat Menahem – Hitva’aduyot* (Brooklyn: Lahak Hanochos 1992) vol. 5 p. 2719. Both of these speeches of R. Schneerson have been translated and annotated by Uri Kaploun, *In Good Hands: 100 Letters and Talks from the Lubavitcher Rebbe Rabbi M. M. Schneerson on Bitachon* (Brooklyn: Sichos in English, 2005), p. 181-192.

quote, “The *Tsemah Tseddek* replied, ‘think positively and things will be positive.’ This implies that the very act of thinking positively, having *bittahon* will give rise to results that are visibly and manifestly good.”

V. THE THREE FUNDAMENTAL PROBLEMS

The traditional definition of *bittahon* presents three significant difficulties.

1. How are the realities of failure and suffering to be explained if *bittahon* guarantees favorable results?³³ R. Yisrael Salanter,³⁴ R. Isaac Volozhiner, and R. Horowitz³⁵ each submit that all misfortunes are inevitably due to deficiencies in *bittahon*.³⁶ This answer spawns a follow-up question: How do we explain the misfortunes which befell even the exceedingly righteous whose *bittahon* was presumably of the highest order? R. Isaac explains that we must assume that even the exceedingly righteous personalities of the Bible, Mishna, and Talmud who endured suffering were lacking in *bittahon* somewhat.³⁷ If this is true, then this type of *bittahon* has very little to do with the lives of almost anybody. Indeed, even R. Horowitz is said to have died from a disease he contracted through practicing his *bittahon* and tending to contagiously ill students.³⁸ The 20th century kabbalist, R. Shlomo Elyashiv,³⁹ who was the teacher of R. Abraham Isaac Kook and a supporter of the traditional view of *bittahon*, offers a more nuanced solution to this problem. He explains that sometimes a righteous person will willingly opt to suffer, either so as not to force God’s hand through properly exercised *bittahon*, or to avoid further suffering in the World to Come. Alternatively, he suggests

³³ As noted previously, Maharal claims that even the most intense forms of *bittahon* can only prevent sudden catastrophic events but not a natural gradually developing misfortune. However, he does not give a detailed explanation for this distinction, and it still would not explain the existence of sudden cataclysmic events.

³⁴ Katz, p. 320.

³⁵ *Madreigat ha-Adam*, p. 205-211.

³⁶ See Binyamin Braun, *be-Darkhei Shalom*, (Jerusalem 2007), p. 388, and Katz, ad loc., who emphasize this point.

³⁷ In this way R. Isaac explains that Jacob, as well, was only afraid of his own fear. Jacob feared that his lack of certainty of a favorable outcome was itself a violation of *bittahon*, and because of that uncertainty he would indeed be susceptible to misfortune.

³⁸ Binyamin Braun, *be-Darkhei Shalom*, (Jerusalem 2007) p. 390.

³⁹ *Leshem Shevo Ve-Ahlamah* Vol. 2, 5:4:3-6.

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that God might hinder the ability of the righteous to implement their *bittahon* in order to fulfill a preordained decree.

2. The Talmud states, “One is not permitted to rely on miracles.”⁴⁰ Isn’t the traditional approach to *bittahon* predicated upon systematic reliance upon supernatural resolutions to precarious situations?⁴¹ In order to resolve this difficulty, a distinction must be made between entering into dangerous situations with the expectation of a miracle, and between dealing with a predicament that is unavoidable. This distinction is hinted at by the language of the above gemara, which also states, “A person should never stand in a hazardous place and say, ‘I will rely on a miracle’.” A careful reading of the gemara indicates that only the person who knowingly places himself in a dangerous situation is enjoined from relying on a miracle.⁴²
3. How can *bittahon* provide for predetermined “favorable” outcomes when many momentarily attractive scenarios ultimately turn out to be detrimental? Praying for specific requests engenders this same problem, which led R. Albo to suggest that a person should perpetually stipulate while praying, that his prayers should only be answered if they are in fact beneficial.⁴³ However, this type of proviso regarding *bittahon* would completely undermine the thrust of the traditional description of *bittahon*. Therefore, within this approach, it must be assumed that *bittahon* cannot only provide for designated outcomes, it can also neutralize any potentially detrimental aspects of those results.⁴⁴

VI. THE EMUNA-BASED APPROACH

The *Hazon Ish* devotes an entire section⁴⁵ of his work on the subject of *bittahon* to debunking the traditional version of *bittahon* advanced by the Alter of Novardok.⁴⁶ He writes the following:

⁴⁰ *Sabbath* 32a.

⁴¹ R. Abraham Weinrot, *Bittahon ve-Hishtadlut* (Jerusalem 2006), p. 188-197, discusses this issue at length.

⁴² Perhaps this distinction is rooted in the comments of R. Nissim of Gerona, *Derashot ha-Ran*, No. 4, who postulates that although there is a predetermined time of death for each individual, a person has the ability to override that predetermined time and take his own life prematurely.

⁴³ *Sefer ha-Ikrim* 4:24.

⁴⁴ R. Goldberg, p. 90-92, also makes this point.

⁴⁵ *Emuna u-Bittahon*, ch. 2.

⁴⁶ It is interesting to note that Braun, ad loc. p. 377, claims that the entire later half of the aforementioned work of *Hazon Ish* is a polemic against the *musar* movement in general.

There is an old misconception rooted in the hearts of many when it comes to the concept of *bittahon*. This term ... has mistakenly become a term to describe the obligation to believe that if a person finds himself in a situation where he faces an undecided future, with two ways apparent - one good and the other not - surely the good outcome will be the one to occur; if one is doubtful and fears the opposite of good occurring, he is lacking in *bittahon*. This understanding of *bittahon* is not correct, for as long as the future has not been revealed through prophecy, the future is not decided, for who knows Hashem's judgments and rewards? No - *bittahon* is not that, but rather the belief that nothing happens by chance, and that everything that occurs under the sun is the result of a decree of God.⁴⁷

The *Hazon Ish* believes that in approaching a potentially perilous situation, a person may not assume or believe that it will be resolved as he wishes, for the future is never certain. He limits the obligation of *bittahon* to the notion that even if calamity will strike, it will not be the result of cruel happenstance, but rather directly from the hand of God. Curiously, the *Hazon Ish* makes no reference to the fact that this perspective of *bittahon* was originally formulated by many medieval authorities.⁴⁸

The obvious attraction, particularly for the modern thinker, of this view is in its avoidance of the fundamental problems raised with the traditional approach; however, an important disadvantage is the necessity to reinterpret primary sources. R. Akiva and Nahum Ish Gam Zu's statements must now be understood as referring not to the immediate assessment of an event, but rather to the composite perspective of hindsight. The thrust of their philosophy would be that, even when tragedy strikes, one can be sure that positive features of the event will eventually become apparent. R. Bahya ibn Pakuda and R. Bahya ben Asher not only state this point explicitly, they make it a primary component of their overall description of *bittahon*. Despite the fact that the *Hazon Ish* makes no reference to this critical element of *bittahon*, it is a necessary rider to his approach in light of these Talmudic texts.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ All translations of the *Hazon Ish's Emuna u-Bittahon* are taken from the recently published translation by Yaakov Goldstein, *Faith and Trust* (Jerusalem: Am Asefer, 2008).

⁴⁸ R. Abraham ben ha-Rambam, *Ha-Maspik le-Ovdei Hashem* (Jerusalem 5733) p. 103; R. Bahya ibn Pakuda, *Hovot ha-Levavot*, Sec. 4 Ch. 1; R. Bahya ben Asher, *Kad ha-Kemah*; and R. Jonah, Commentary to *Mishlei* 3:26. R. Weinrot, p. 37, and R. Goldberg, p. 6, amass the full range of later authorities who subscribe to this version of *bittahon*.

⁴⁹ R. Aharon Lichtenstein, *By His Light*, Ed. R. Reuven Ziegler (Hoboken, NJ: Ktav Pub. House, 2003) p. 142, and "In Clarification of the Trait of *Bittahon*," *De'ot*

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For the *emuna*-based approach, we also must reconsider the numerous verses which imply that *bittahon* eliminates fright and despair, such as *Isaiah* 12:2, “Behold God is my salvation, I will trust and not be afraid” – if *bittahon* provides no assurances, why is there no fear?⁵⁰ This problem is addressed by the *Hazon Ish*:

When a person encounters an event that according to the ways of the world involves danger to him...his intense feelings weaken his resolve to remember that we do not live by chance and that there is nothing stopping the Almighty from saving him and from arranging causes that will change the outcome. When one exercises self-restraint at such a difficult time and internalizes the known truth that this is not a chance misfortune but rather it is all from Hashem, blessed be He, for better or for worse; when one allows one’s faith to alleviate the fear and give one the courage to believe in the possibility of salvation; when one allows oneself to understand that nothing one is facing necessarily tends more towards a bad outcome than a good one - then one has achieved the trait of *bittahon*.

It is clear from the *Hazon Ish*’s formulation that *bittahon* only provides for the alleviation of fear but not its total obliteration, since the possibility of failure still looms. However, the *Hazon Ish*’s explanation was actually originally articulated by R. Jonah who makes one crucial addendum, which is strangely omitted by the *Hazon Ish*. R. Jonah adds that full *bittahon*

(1976): 352-355, claims that this is exactly the brand of *bittahon* which is derided by the *Hazon Ish*. He argues that the *Hazon Ish* promotes a *bittahon* which does not “scatter the clouds of misfortune” or “raise expectations” at all, but rather merely “expresses a steadfast commitment - even if the outcome will be bad, we will remain reliant on and connected to God.” R. Lichtenstein proceeds to argue with the *Hazon Ish*’s categorical condemnation while instead promoting a dual approach to *bittahon* which integrates these two themes (R. Bahya and the *Hazon Ish*). I believe that R. Lichtenstein’s understanding of the *Hazon Ish*’s approach is overly schematic; not only because of the aforementioned Talmudic dictums, but also in light of the fact that the *Hazon Ish*’s medieval predecessors take the very stance he would be censuring. It is more likely that the “dual approach” advanced by R. Lichtenstein is not the synergy of divergent themes, but two aspects of the same, both of which are amenable to the *Hazon Ish*. These two perspectives address two different points in time. *Bittahon* in the initial stages, as an immediate response to misfortune, entails what David describes as, “To You, God, I shall offer up my soul” (*Psalms* 25:1). At that point it is impossible to see the redemptive nature of the event, and *bittahon* is not a promise but a command to remain committed nonetheless. However, subsequent assessments do afford the victim the ability to reflect on the experience, and to uncover and realize the positive aspects of that misfortune.

⁵⁰ See R. Baruch Rosenberg, *Mevakshei Torah*, vol. 8 part 38 p. 28 and R. Weinrot p. 152-169.

entails not only recognizing God's unfettered ability to bring salvation in all situations, but also trusting in the merciful nature of God, as the verse states, "But I have trusted in Thy mercy" (*Psalms* 13:6). R. Jonah asserts that only through *bittahon*, which is predicated on God's inclination to be merciful, can fear be dampened and hope emboldened.

Another resolution to this difficulty is offered by R. Abraham ben ha-Rambam,⁵¹ who identifies a second track within *bittahon*. Although R. Abraham believes in the doubtful nature of generic *bittahon*, nevertheless whenever God promises a positive outcome to a given situation there is no reason to fear the negative, and any misgivings would constitute a lack of *bittahon*. Indeed this second form of *bittahon* is classified by the *Hazon Ish* as well:⁵²

There is more to *bittahon* - for a holy spirit rests on the one who trusts in God, accompanied by a strength of spirit that tells him that God will indeed help him, as David said, "Though a host encamp against me, my heart will not fear; Though war arise against me, in spite of this I shall be confident" (*Psalms* 27:3). This matter varies according to the level of the person's *bittahon* and his degree of holiness.⁵³

Moreover, R. Bahya ben Asher and R. Elijah of Vilna,⁵⁴ claim that this latter form of reliance upon God is what is represented by the specific term "*bittahon*," while reliance upon God when there are no assurances

⁵¹ *Ha-Maspik le-Ovdei Hashem* (Jerusalem 5733) p. 76-77.

⁵² R. Weinrot ch. 5, R. Goldberg p. 74, and R. Eliezer Ben-Porat, "*Bittahon* According to *Hazon Ish*" *Shema'atin* 139 (2000):147-149 also note that the *Hazon Ish's* comments are patterned after those of R. Abraham ben ha-Rambam. R. Joseph Zalman Bloch, *Iggeret al ha-Bitahon*, (Monsey, 2000) p. 47 takes the difficult stance that when *Hazon Ish* spoke earlier of the uncertain nature of *bittahon* he was depicting only superficial *bittahon*, while in these latter comments he is addressing genuine *bittahon*, which is in fact assured. R. Bloch claims that *Hazon Ish* initially deemphasized his true stance on *bittahon* so as not to mislead those fooled into a false sense of *bittahon*. [R. Bloch mentions the rumor that R. Eliyahu Lopian forbade yeshiva students from reading this work of *Hazon Ish* out of fear that the students would be influenced by the original formulation of *bittahon* which was incomplete]. R. Bloch's interpretation is obviously suspect for many reasons, but given the fact that *Hazon Ish's* comments appear to be patterned after those of R. Abraham son of Rambam it is completely untenable.

⁵³ In accordance with this position, *Hazon Ish*, *Zera'im*, *Shevi'it* sec. 18 calls into question any potential leniency for those observing the *shemittah*, due to financial concerns. Even though in other areas of Jewish law financial difficulties would certainly be a valid concern, since the Torah (*Lev.* 25:20-21) promises that those who abide by the laws of *shemittah* will be sustained, there is no basis for leniency in this case.

⁵⁴ *Commentary to Proverbs* 14:26.

is technically referred to as “*hisayon*.” R. Abraham alleges that the verses which imply an assured response to *bittahon* are in fact only referring to situations covered by this second variety of *bittahon* and not by the more generic forms of reliance.

VII. BITTAHON IN THE ABSENCE OF EMUNA

What about situations where faith is either not necessary or not present? It is reported that R. Yisrael Salanter and R. Shmuel Strashun were once sitting in the study hall of Vilna discussing the nature of *bittahon*. R. Strashun contended that *bittahon* could not be utilized to obtain luxurious items and R. Salanter disagreed. In an effort to prove his point, R. Salanter attempted to obtain a pocket watch through concentrated *bittahon*. Almost immediately, a man entered the study hall and informed R. Strashun that an acquaintance had died and bequeathed his watch to R. Strashun.⁵⁵ The apocryphal nature aside, this issue is presumably tied to the greater discussion regarding the definition of *bittahon*. If *bittahon* is an actualization of *emuna*, then presumably it can only function in situations which actually demand *emuna*, precluding a self-contrived dilemma. If however, *bittahon* is distinct from *emuna*, then it might be able to function even in an artificial setting.

Likewise, there is a dispute regarding the *bittahon* of an evildoer, who presumably does not possess sincere *emuna*. R. Jonah, ad loc., and the author of *ha-Emuna ve-ha-Bittahon*, ad loc., argue that even an entrenched evil-doer may rely on *bittahon*. R. Elijah of Vilna, who also supported this view in his *Bi'ur Ha-Gra* on *Isaiah* 12:2, finds an earlier source for it in the *Yalkut Shim'oni*, Psalms, sec. 719, on the verse, “Many are the sorrows of the wicked, but he who trusts in the Lord, mercy shall surround him” (Psalms 32:10), to which the *Yalkut Shim'oni* comments, “Even an evil-doer who trusts in the Lord will be surrounded by mercy.”⁵⁶ R. Bahya ibn Pakuda⁵⁷ and R. Abraham ben ha-Rambam⁵⁸, disagree and believe that the *bittahon* of the evildoer cannot possibly be effective since *bittahon* is an expression of *emuna*, and his *emuna* is inevitably

⁵⁵ Eliach, p. 227, Zaichyk sec. 158, and R. Goldberg p. 84.

⁵⁶ R. Elijah of Vilna's observation is cited by R. Israel Meir Kagan, *Nefutsot Yisrael*, Ch. 8. Therefore, R. Elijah of Vilna [as quoted by R. Abraham Yitzchok Bloch, *Shiurei Da'at*, (Jerusalem 2001) p. 59.] declared that a thief who was detected and is fearful of being apprehended may rely on *bittahon* to see his way out.

⁵⁷ *Hovot ha-Levavot*, Sec. 4 Ch. 3.

⁵⁸ *Ha-Maspik le-Ovdei Hashem*, p. 88.

insincere.⁵⁹ The author of *ha-Emuna ve-ha-Bittahon* and R. Elijah of Vilna would presumably argue that *bittahon* is an independent principle which cannot be dislodged by hypocritical *emuna*.

Admittedly, R. Jonah's opinion cannot be explained within this framework. As previously noted, R. Jonah accepts the premise that *bittahon* is an implementation of *emuna*, while he also maintains that *bittahon* may be employed by the unrepentant evildoer. He would probably argue that faith can be compartmentalized. Belief in God's ability to punish wrongdoers and God's proclivity to deal mercifully with sinners can be separated one from the other. Since, as R. Jonah stated, any overly optimistic approach to *bittahon* is founded in the merciful nature of God, it should be applicable even to the undeserving. This is borne out by R. Jonah when he writes, "the mercy of God is abundant, greater than any sin, and He has mercy on all who are humble and ask for mercy."

VIII. HISHTADLUT

The dispute regarding the true nature of *bittahon* is most often felt with regard to the issue of human intervention, or *hishtadlut*. The followers of *ha-Emuna ve-ha-Bittahon* and Maharal who believe that proper *bittahon* can assure success in any and all dilemmas must also subscribe to the notion that *bittahon* is supernatural because nature does not permit an individual to perpetually evade misfortune. This is evident as well from Ramban's comments on Lev. 26:11, where he asserts that *bittahon* can be self-sustaining, precluding the need for human intervention, as he writes, "when the entire people of Israel are perfect in their conduct, their matters are not governed by the laws of nature at all...Rather God will bless their bread and water and remove all manners of sickness from among them...the righteous people who lived during the period of the prophets would conduct themselves in this manner."⁶⁰ The *Taz*⁶¹ emphasizes that Ramban limits his remarks

⁵⁹ R. Aharon Kotler, *Mishnat Rebbi Aharon*, (Lakewood 2001) vol. 1 p. 18, struggles to resolve the opinion of R. Bahya and R. Abraham ben ha-Rambam with the *Yalkut Shim'oni* that stated explicitly that even the evildoer can access *bittahon*.

⁶⁰ R. Aharon Lichtenstein, *By His Light*, p. 136, reports that R. Hayyim Soloveichik was so disturbed by the comments of Ramban that he was inclined to believe that the offending words of Ramban were an interpolation by a later copyist. R. Lichtenstein writes, "Rav Hayyim's far reaching claim lacks a textual basis, and I personally cannot accept it."

⁶¹ *Yoreh De'ah* 336:1

to those unique individuals whose *bittahon* is so profound that they entrust their entire wellbeing to *bittahon* alone. This implies that, even for Ramban, those who are less than fully engaged should not be tempted to shirk their obligation of *hishtadlut*. R. Joseph Dov Soloveichik of Brisk⁶² describes the subjective nature of the *bittahon-hishtadlut* relationship as a self-fulfilling conviction. He explains that there are many levels of *bittahon*, and the requisite measure of *hishtadlut* is based on a sliding scale with the degree of *bittahon* - the more *bittahon*, the less *hishtadlut* is needed, and vice versa. Within the *Beit ha-Levi*'s scale, Ramban would apparently hold that it is theoretically possible for *bittahon* to increase to such an extent that it can totally eclipse the natural requirement of *hishtadlut* and single-handedly provide for all human needs. Thus in the context of *hishtadlut* as well, Ramban assumes that *bittahon* is a supernatural principle in conformity with our other remarks about Ramban and his school.⁶³

Rambam,⁶⁴ R. Bahya ibn Pakuda,⁶⁵ and R. Abraham ben ha-Rambam,⁶⁶ argue that *bittahon* cannot avert the need for *hishtadlut* entirely in any context; just as all would readily accept that *bittahon* cannot transfer food from the table to one's stomach, circumventing the need to eat. They might also accept the *bittahon-hishtadlut* relationship of the *Beit ha-Levi* - albeit with the caveat that there is a natural threshold of *hishtadlut* beyond which *bittahon* cannot cross. They maintain that *bittahon* can adjust *hishtadlut* only within the range of what would generally be considered normal or natural. This is in accordance with their general approach that *bittahon* cannot consistently provide favorable results because *bittahon*'s influence is restricted to the realm of nature, and does not extend beyond it.⁶⁷

⁶² *Beit ha-Levi*, (Jerusalem 1996) p. 63.

⁶³ This could explain the position of R. Zundel Salant, who felt (as reported by R. Eliyahu Dessler, *Mikhtav me-Eliyahu*, vol. 1 p. 188) that according to his personal level of *bittahon* his obligation of *hishtadlut* could be satisfied through minimal effort on his part.

⁶⁴ *Commentary to the Mishna, Pesachim* 4:10.

⁶⁵ *Hovot ha-Levavot*, 4:3-5.

⁶⁶ *Ha-Maspik le-Ovdei Hashem*, p. 77-81.

⁶⁷ This debate between Ramban and Ramban regarding *hishtadlut* and *bittahon* might have its roots in the larger discussion between Ramban and Ramban regarding nature and the supernatural. See Ramban, Ex. 13:16, *Torat Hashem Temimah, Kitvei ha-Ramban*, (Jerusalem 1963), vol. 1 p. 153-4, and Ramban, *Moreh Nevukhim*, vol. 2 ch. 27-29, *Commentary to the Mishna, Avot* 5:5. [Regarding Ramban's position on these issues, see R. Simchah Zissel Ziv, *Hokhma u-Musar* (New York 1957) vol. 2 sec 214; R. Aryeh Leib Lopianski, *Lev Tsion* (Jerusalem 1999) p. 160; and R. David Berger "Miracles and The Natural Order in Nahmanides," *Rabbi Moses*

R. Yisrael Salanter⁶⁸ links this discussion to the Talmudic dispute between R. Yishmael and R. Shimon ben Yohai recorded in *Berakhot* 35b. R. Shimon declares that the requirement of *hishtadlut* can be obviated through intense dedication to Torah study, whereas R. Yishmael maintains that a person must always “lead a life in the way of the world,” dedicating time to both. While not intended as such, R. Salanter’s observation raises serious concerns regarding Ramban’s approach since the gemara concludes, “Multitudes did as R. Yishmael and were successful, while others did as R. Shimon ben Yohai and were not successful.” How can Ramban sanction the opinion of R. Shimon ben Yohai if the Gemara attests to its inviability? Based on Ramban’s previous comments he would probably distinguish between the rule and the exception. The gemara only states that when the “multitudes” do as R. Shimon they will fail, but perhaps the inimitable individual who follows his view may indeed flourish.⁶⁹ We can surmise that Rambam, R. Bahya, and R. Abraham ben ha-Rambam would ignore this distinction and argue that the halakha is categorically in accordance with R. Yishmael.⁷⁰

These two views regarding *hishtadlut* can be found in the midrashic literature as well. The verse states, “The Lord took man and placed him in Eden to work it etc” (Gen. 2:15). On this verse, *Avot de-Rabbi Natan* 11:1, comments, “even Adam did not eat until he did work.” The implication is that even in the ideal world, such as the world before Adam

Nahmanides: Explorations in His Religious and Literary Virtuosity. ed. Isadore Twersky, Cambridge, 1983].

⁶⁸ *Even Yisrael*, sec. 3.

⁶⁹ This distinction was previously expressed by R. Yisrael Salanter ad loc., R. Hayyim Volozhiner, *Nefesh ha-Hayyim* 1:8, R. Yitzchak Zev Soloveichik, *Hiddushei Maran Riz ha-Levi al ha-Torah* p. 6, and R. Yaakov Yosef of Polennoye, *Toldot Yaakov Yosef to Noah* sec. 3.

⁷⁰ Surprisingly, Rambam, *Hil. Shemittah ve-Yovel* 13:13 writes, “Not only the tribe of Levi, but also each and every individual ... whose spirit moves him ... to set himself apart in order to stand before the Lord, to serve Him, to worship Him, and to know Him ... The Lord will grant him in this world whatsoever is sufficient for him.” It seems that while Rambam generally agrees with the platform of his son R. Abraham and R. Bahya ibn Pakuda, he feels that Torah study is different. [See R. Naphtali Zvi Judah Berlin, *Ha’amek Davar*, Ex. 25:20, as well as the mishna, *Avot* 3:8, *Shemot Rabbah* 25:9, and R. Hayyim ibn Attar, *Or ha-Hayyim* Ex. 14:27]. This should not be confused with Rambam’s indictment – in *Hil. Talmud Torah* 3:10 and *Commentary to Avot* 4:5 – of those who sustain themselves in the uninterrupted study of Torah through charitable donations. Rambam in *Hil. Shemittah ve-Yovel* refers only to those who are totally unhindered by monetary worries without any expectation of charitable support.

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sinned, *hishtadlut* was a core element⁷¹. However, commenting on that same verse, *Pirke de-Rabbi Eliezer* ch. 12, states, “Maybe you will infer that there was work in Eden, rather it refers to toil in the study of Torah.” R. Moshe Hayyim Luzzatto⁷² explains that initially, ideally, God had planned on providing directly for all human needs without the need for *hishtadlut*; the subsequent requirement of *hishtadlut* was only the result of Adam’s sin, which led to the Torah stating, “by the sweat of your brow you shall eat bread” (Gen. 3:19). R. Luzzatto must assume that the most intense forms of *bittahon* could in theory have suspended all requirements of *hishtadlut*.

IX. “THESE AND THOSE”

Throughout the literature pertaining to *bittahon*, from the central discussion surrounding its source text to the related issue of *hishtadlut*, there appear to be two legitimate approaches to *bittahon*, each with a bona fide collection of backers. Therefore, I submit that the *Hazon Ish*’s description of the opposing view of *bittahon* as an “old misconception” is not to be taken literally, but is rather the *Hazon Ish*’s manner of expressing his strong views on the matter. As students of the *Hazon Ish* are well aware, he does not shy away from taking sides even in full blown medieval disputes.⁷³ However, I readily acknowledge that even though these two attitudes towards *bittahon* are grounded, the *Hazon Ish*’s model is undoubtedly more relevant and palatable to the contemporary Jew. Moreover, the type of *bittahon* which even theoretically promises results and deemphasizes *hishtadlut* can easily become a safe haven for the reckless or delusional Jew able to recite slogans of reliance and trust. Nonetheless, I believe the point needs to be made, not only for the sake of tolerance but for its theological value as well, that there are two genuine versions of *bittahon*, and it is in instances such as this that we are commanded to proclaim, “*eilu ve-eilu divrei Elokim hayyim*,” “these and those are the word of the living God.”⁷⁴

⁷¹ This point is made explicitly by R. Abraham ben ha-Rambam, *Ha-Maspik le-Ordei Hashem*, p. 82.

⁷² *Mesillat Yesharim*, ch. 21.

⁷³ Perhaps the *Hazon Ish* deliberately omitted any references to the earlier sources regarding *bittahon* to deemphasize this point.

⁷⁴ R. Aharon Lichtenstein, *By His Light*, p. 157, also states with regards to *bittahon*, “we must reject any attempt to impose a narrow interpretation in areas of Jewish philosophy or thought, as if there were only one view on these issues.”