

**DADON Kotel**

**The Casting of Lots in the Bible and the Modern Age: Miracles or Randomness?  
The Traditional Jewish Perspective**

**Introduction<sup>1</sup>**

What is the significance of the casting of lots? From Greek philosophy to modern rationalism, there has been an ongoing secularization of the concepts of the casting of lots and randomness, which are allegedly only governed by blind chance and meaningless. Mathematical science has even developed an entire branch of probability designed to analyze random events while ignoring their possible interpretation. However, in another world, the world of the Sages, casting lots and randomness have serious roles with multiple meanings. A surprising number of Jewish sources consider the casting or drawing of lots as a good way to decide on ethical matters, noting its religious value. Through observation of lotteries and randomness, it can be demonstrated that ostensibly chance events are full of meaning and, thereby, exciting cultural and religious options.

**Science: From Hubris to Randomness**

During the nineteenth century, the hubris of the natural sciences reached its zenith. Scientific thinking was dominated by positivism, i.e., the view that nature behaves deterministically, with absolute predictability. It followed that if all the data of the present were known to us, we could foresee all future events accurately, since everything occurs as a result of something else. Scientific positivism was convinced that it was only a matter of time before humanity would have the scientific knowledge needed to explain and anticipate all natural phenomena.

Such assumptions were challenged in the twentieth century. The natural sciences are becoming less deterministic. Randomness has been increasingly recognized as one of the most fundamental natural phenomena. Whether from the location of the elementary particles in an atom or the nature of a genetic chain created in the process of fertilization, there is no way to predict the future at the level of the individual, not because we lack the knowledge but because such information does not exist in reality. The specific processes are random, similar to a lottery. The laws of nature in many cases are statistical laws, which generally determine that “such and such

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<sup>1</sup>When creating this article I utilized some of the main ideas of Prof. E. Merzbach's following book:  
*עלי מרצבך, הגיון הגורל: משמעות הפיס והאקראיות ביהדות, תשס"ט – 2009, ירושלים*  
(Merzbach, Ely: The Logic of the Lottery. The Meaning of Randomness in Judaism, Jerusalem, 2009).

will happen” but cannot predict what will happen with the individual. Today, it is also clear to scientists that physics, chemistry and biology will never run out of new things to discover.<sup>2</sup> We shall never know everything about nature. Our knowledge is advancing but the unknown is infinite.<sup>3</sup>

Since science has recognized the randomness of phenomena, human consciousness has two options: One is to say that randomness is meaningless, something that happens and nothing else, while the other is to say that randomness is a tool used by Divine Providence within the laws of nature.

Different approaches to casting lots can be derived: Is casting lots, obtaining a random result, the right solution to situations of indecision? Should we ascribe significance to the result of the casting of lots or is it merely due to blind chance?

#### **The Case of the American Ship the William Brown<sup>4</sup>**

In the mid-nineteenth century, the American ship the William Brown sailed from Liverpool, England, to the United States. Far from shore, she collided with a large iceberg and began to sink. Two lifeboats were lowered into the sea. The first, carrying the captain of the ship and some other people, managed to arrive to safety in a few days. A sailor named Holmes, along with six other crew members and twenty-two passengers, jumped into the second lifeboat, far exceeding its capacity. Before the lifeboat pulled away from the ship, Holmes heard one of the women in the boat crying, who had become separated from her young daughter. He returned bravely to the ship, risking his life, rescued the girl and brought her to the lifeboat. The crew began to row but soon realized that the boat was filling with water. It was necessary to lighten the load to avoid capsizing. Holmes decided to cast all the single men who were not crew members into the sea, so the crew could continue to paddle and save the families and women in the boat. He threw the single men into the sea with his own hands. Through huge efforts, the lifeboat managed to reach safety with its remaining passengers. When they came to America, Holmes was accused of manslaughter. The jury wanted to pardon him but the judge sentenced him to a term of imprisonment with hard labor on the grounds that he should have cast lots among the passengers and not decided who should die by himself.

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<sup>2</sup>Poincaré, H., *La Valeur de la Science*. Pages: 266.-267.

<sup>3</sup> Planck, M., *Where is science going*. London Allen & Unwin, 1933, page 82.

<sup>4</sup>Merzbach, pp. 25-26

## **The Case of Kastner**

In Budapest, it is difficult not to mention the case of the Hungarian Jew Rudolf Israel Kastner in this context. Between May and July 1944, Hungary's Jews were deported to the gas chambers in Auschwitz at the rate of 12,000 people a day. Kastner negotiated with Adolf Eichmann to allow 1,684 Jews to leave for Switzerland instead on what became known as the Kastner train, in exchange for money, gold and diamonds. Kastner moved to Israel after the war, becoming a spokesman for the Ministry of Trade and Industry in 1952. In 1953, he was accused of having been a Nazi collaborator in a pamphlet self-published by Malchiel Gruenwald, a freelance writer. The Israeli government sued Gruenwald for libel on Kastner's behalf, resulting in a trial that lasted 18 months, and a ruling in 1955 that Kastner had, in the words of Judge Benjamin Halevy, "sold his soul to the devil." Again, the question is that although Kastner saved thousands of Jews, did he have the right to decide who would live and who would die? Should he have cast lots?

## **Randomness and the Casting of Lots in the Bible, Halachic Literature and Jewish Thought**

There are many examples of randomness and the casting of lots in the halachic literature and Jewish thought, from the Bible to contemporary books of responsa. The fundamental issues relating to the concept of randomness include nature and miracles, "hidden miracles," free choice and more.

### **Examples of the casting of lots in the Bible include the following:<sup>5</sup>**

During the preparation for Yom Kippur, the High Priest chooses between two goats by casting lots, as it says in Leviticus: "He is to cast lots for the two goats—one lot for the Lord and the other for the scapegoat"(Leviticus 16:8).

1. The settlement of the Holy Land was determined by lot, as it says: "But the land will be divided by lot. By the names of the tribes of their fathers they will inherit" (Numbers 26:55). For this purpose, they set out two ballot boxes, one bearing the names of the tribes and the other the names of regions in the Holy Land.
2. The prophet Jonah was discovered by lot and thrown from the ship into the sea.

There are many other examples of the use of lots in the Bible, such as the allocation of priestly positions (Chronicles 1) and, of course, in the Book of Esther.

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<sup>5</sup>Merzbach, pp. 43 - 46

These examples have practical halachic implications. Arbiters such as Rabbi Yehuda HaChassid (Sefer HaChasidim) ruled that lots can be used in emergency situations. For example, the Chatam Sofer determined who would and would not be drafted into the army by lot; Rabbi Feinstein ruled that if there are two mortally wounded and the medic has only one injection, he must flip a coin! Nonetheless, the result of a random event points to hidden Providence. From the division of the country by lottery, we learn about the laws of division among partners and successors.<sup>6</sup>

### **The *Gra lot*<sup>7</sup>**

One of the most fascinating types of lottery is known as *Goral HaGra*, which was used on various occasions. What is *Goral HaGra*? In essence, it is used to find a solution to a problem by the random opening of a holy book, often the Bible, Pentateuch or the Book of Psalms, noting the first verse that comes out and deducing the right answer from it.<sup>8</sup> This form of lottery is related to the *Gra*.<sup>9</sup> Not everyone allowed himself to engage in *Goral HaGra*, usually only a very few and unique rabbis, who accompanied the practice by fasting, prayer and charity, and considered the results not as advice but as conclusive decisions.

However, through the Ages there were many rabbis who object to this practice, as it stands seemingly contrary to the commandment "*Be innocent with the Lord your God*" (Deut. 18:13) prohibiting reliance on magical sources.<sup>10</sup> One of the dramatic events<sup>11</sup> in which the *Gra lot* was used was the identification of 12 among the 35 fighters who were murdered by Arabs on the eve of the Declaration of the State of Israel, next to the Arabvillage of Surif during attempts to reach Gush Etzion. The bodies of the fighters were destroyed by the Arabs and only after about three years were the corpses gathered and delivered to be buried. Twenty-three of the bodies were identified definitively, while for the rest the rabbinate could not determine who was who with certainty. The Chief Rabbi of Jerusalem, Rabbi Zvi Pesach Frank, stated that the decision would

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<sup>6</sup>As it is said in Shulchan Aruch *Choshen Mishpat* 175.

<sup>7</sup>Merzbach, pp. 68-85

<sup>8</sup>See more in: Yalkut HaGoralot Zuta, vol 1, Bakel edition- Jerusalem- 1961.

<sup>9</sup>The Vilna Gaon—*Gra* (Gera) (1720–1798), full name HaGaon Rabbenu Eliyahu mi-Vilna (of Vilna). He was given the title of "Gaon," which was the title of the president of the Babylon yeshiva, owing to his exceptional erudition, even in secular sciences. The Vilna Gaon used mathematics and astronomy to understand the Torah. He was among the first to oppose Chassidism (*Misnagdim*). Owing to his activity, Vilna became a center of non-Chassidic Judaism (*Hisnagdus*) in Europe. When he was around 60 years of age, he wanted to immigrate to Israel but only got as far as Königsberg before returning to Vilna. In 1810, a large group of his students immigrated to Israel and founded the Pharisee Ashkenazi Community (*Adat Ashkenazim Perushim*) in Safed and Jerusalem. He produced more than sixty works in various fields: commentaries on the Tanakh and Zohar, notes on the Mishna and Tosefta, Talmud and Shulchan Aruch; texts on grammar, the geography of Israel, mathematics and astronomy, most of which were transcribed and printed by his students.

<sup>10</sup>See: Babilonyan Talmud 113b.; Teshuvot HaRambam, Jehoshua Blau edition, (Jerusalem- 1919) paragraph 172.

<sup>11</sup>Merzbach, pp. 82-83 (Example 18)

be made by the *Gra lot*. The task fell on the shoulders of the Tzadik (Saint) of Jerusalem, Rabbi Aryeh Levin. The identification was performed at his yeshiva,<sup>12</sup> in the presence of his son-in-law, his son and representatives of the families. They lit 12 candles and decided that while standing in front of each body, the last sentence on the page they would open randomly should include the name or an allusion to the name of each one seeking identification. To their astonishment, each time they opened a page, the verses on the bottom clearly identified the name of one of the martyrs!<sup>13</sup>

People think that casting lots is like buying a lottery ticket, that it is governed by blind chance. However, our Sages say that it is not. The casting of lots expresses the Divine wish and hidden Providence. It is hidden to maintain free choice, not to force the heretic to believe, and allows each person to have his own opinions. An example would be if someone were saved from a traffic accident and said it was a miracle. Statistically speaking, in such accidents 90% are killed and 10% are saved. I could rightly claim it was not a miracle but a statistical calculation. However, the accident survivor would also be correct in seeing his survival as a miraculous providential intervention that wanted to say something by rescuing and including him in the 10% percent saved. Statistics have two levels and both are correct.

### **The Jewish Meaning of Randomness**

Randomness has profound and important Jewish significance. It has served the Jewish people repeatedly throughout history. The world was created as imperfect ... but why? It was to leave room for G-d to intervene from time to time. He intervenes during the history of mankind by sending messages to individuals or groups. However, man retains free choice regarding the interpretations of such messages.

Our Sages' unique approach to random events is not limited to the purely philosophical but has fundamental implications on human behavior in everyday life. This is reflected in the many laws relating to the casting of lots. Nonetheless, it can be assumed that due to Western cultural influence, many Jews are unfamiliar with the obligation to cast lots or the Jewish meaning of randomness.

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<sup>12</sup>A yeshiva is an institution for the study of the Torah, i.e., for the religious education of students after the completion of primary education. A junior yeshiva (*yeshiva ketana*) is a secondary school and an advanced yeshiva (*yeshiva govoha*) is for higher studies. Historically, yeshivas have operated wherever there was a Jewish population because the study of the Torah is not optional but is the basic obligation from the Torah. Rabbis and religious judges (*dayanim*) are educated at yeshivas.

<sup>13</sup>See more in: Simcha Raz, *Ish Tsadik Haya*, Sh. Zak Edition, Jerusalem-1980, pages: 111-117.

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7. Simcha Raz, *Ish Tsadik Haya*, Sh. Zak Edition, Jerusalem-1980, pages: 111-117.

## Abstract

This article analyses the Jewish perspective of the phenomena of *Casting of Lots in the Bible and the Modern Age*. The author explores the practices of Casting of Lots and the Randomness idea in Biblical life, as well as in rabbinic literature and Jewish Thought, from Talmudic times until today.

Among the questions the author is researching are: What is the significance of the casting of lots in the scientific world and in the world of the Sages?

The author bring few cases in which Casting of Lots was not used but maybe should have been used, like the case of the American Ship *the William Brown*, The controversial case of the Hungarian Jew *Rudolf Israel Kastner*. The author bring one of the most fascinating types of Jewish lottery practice known as *Goral HaGra* and one of the most dramatic events in which the *Gra lot* was used: The identification of 12 among the 35 fighters who were murdered by Arabs on the eve of the Declaration of the State of Israel, during attempts to reach Gush Etzion. After The bodies of the fighters were destroyed by the Arabs and only after about three years were the corpses gathered and delivered to be buried. The article is finalized with the Jewish Meaning of Randomness.

**Key words:** *Casting of Lots, Bible, lottery, Jewish, Randomness.*

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