YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**PRINCIPLES OF FAITH**

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The htm version of this shiur is available at:

<http://vbm-torah.org/archive/faith/21faith.htm>

Shiur #21: Knowledge and Providence, Part II

Providence, Nature and Miracles

# Introduction

Last week I discussed how claiming that God has knowledge of human affairs involves a commitment, at least to some extent, to the conception of a personal God, which of course matches the depiction of God in the Torah. In the Torah we see God acting in the world and shaping events – most prominently, in the Exodus from Egypt and in the revelation at Sinai. These events involve explicit miracles in which God changes the course of nature in order to bring salvation to Israel. But God's involvement in the world is not limited to the spectacularly miraculous: He intervenes in much subtler ways, guiding historical events without those events obviously diverging from the course of nature. The events described in *Megillat* *Esther* are perhaps the purest example of this. As many have pointed out, God is not mentioned explicitly even once in the *Megilla*, and the salvation takes the form of court politics rather than dramatic events, yet it is clear that we are meant to understand that the course of events is not merely by chance, as Mordechai says to Esther:

For if you altogether stay silent at this time, relief and deliverance will arise to the Jews from another place…[[1]](#footnote-1)

Mordechai is confident of ultimate deliverance, from elsewhere if not from Esther because he believes in *hashgacha*; he believes that God is in control of events and He will ensure that His people are not destroyed. To go beyond last week's discussion, about God knowing what goes on, this week I want to discuss how to think about such involvement. There are many questions we can ask about this involvement – regarding its effect on human freedom, regarding the problem of the existence of evil, and others. This week I want to focus on the basic notion of *hashgacha* and its relationship to how we understand the *nature* of the world.

# The Nature of Nature

Most people today believe that the world has a continuously stable nature. That is to say, that the forces and substances that make up the material world are the way they are and when something changes, it is in an essentially predictable and even law-like manner. This is the assumption that underlies both ancient and modern science – that there are laws that describe the way the physical world works. We trust this assumption implicitly in our use of technology of every sort – every time we drive in a car, go over a bridge, or fly in an airplane, we do so confidently because we are confident that the laws of nature are stable such that the car's brakes will continue to work, the steel spans of the bridge will not spontaneously part or the laws of aerodynamics will not suddenly change, causing our plane to crash. In fact, this assumption is a basic one to human flourishing even at a pre-technological level. Our abilities to control our environments and to plan ahead depend upon the assumption of the continuity of nature. Imagine how terrifying (and probably impossible) life would be if solids spontaneously and unpredictably turned into gases, or if gravity spontaneously stopped working.

It is probably impossible to really doubt the stability of nature in general, but it is certainly possible to wonder, given some sort of stable base: what keeps certain aspects of nature in sync? This is particularly true of those parts of nature that are intrinsically dynamic: we do not really need an explanation of why a rock stays a rock, or why water is wet – they just are that way. Yet throughout history human beings have sought to explain why plants grow and animals move and grow, why the sun and the other celestial bodies move as they do, why there is rain and drought, etc. Some of these processes lend themselves very well to mechanistic explanations: the movement of the stars and planets is so regular and observable that people have been offering mechanistic explanations of them for thousands of years. Other processes are very difficult to account for just mechanistically – as simply part of the nature of the objects involved. Biological processes and the weather are notable examples of this. Yet these processes, though dynamic, are far from totally random.

# The (Partial) Denial of Nature

In the pagan world, the leading explanation for such dynamic processes was to attribute them to the intentions of a god. Human beings have the capacity to affect their environment intentionally in a manner that is neither totally random nor totally law-like. It made a lot of sense to pagans to attribute natural processes that likewise appeared to be neither totally random nor totally law-like to super-human beings. These being were just like humans except that their intentions could affect the world on a larger scale. They thus had gods of the sun, the winds, the storms, the ocean, the harvest, the rain, and many more. The vicissitudes of the dynamic processes of nature were explained in terms of the personalities of the gods in charge of them. Nature is both regular and unpredictable and this was explained in terms of the actions of the gods behaving like unpredictable (and even capricious) humans. When drawn out to its logical conclusion, this pagan perspective amounts to the denial of nature, or at least those aspects of nature controlled by the gods. Storms, for example, are not presumed to be the result of physical processes involving air pressures, humidity, temperature and whatever else modern meteorology studies. According to such thinking – these factors by themselves never *cause* a storm – the cause of the storm is the sky god's anger which brings about all the associated meteorological phenomena.

All of this is of course straightforwardly *avoda zara*. But what viable alternatives do we have to this pagan perspective? One alternative is to deny the pagan aspect of this explanation but to maintain the notion that natural processes (and perhaps all the causal stability as well) are the products of divine *intention*. God maintains the world in every moment, ensuring that things happen the way they do. This comes at a cost, though: the regularity of natural processes becomes fundamentally an illusion. The world continues the way it does only because God maintains it that way, and the only real explanation of anything that happens is that it is God's will. Now such a conception is perfectly consistent with modern science and technology – God maintains the regularity of nature because He so chooses, but that regularity is not, fundamentally, part of the world – it is something that God brings to the world and can remove at any moment (and perhaps frequently does). I am inclined to believe that such a worldview makes scientific investigation futile and meaningless – the world has no nature and there is not really anything to investigate.

The great religious advantage of this perspective is that if nature is an illusion then miracles and divine intervention are not a problem. *Everything* that happens is by divine intervention – God guides the world at the highest of resolutions. Part of this involves giving us the appearance of regularity but it is no more than that.

This conception of *hashgacha* certainly does exist in the history of Jewish thought. In *Chazal* we find the expression "Everything is in the hands of Heaven except for fear of Heaven,"[[2]](#footnote-2) which, at least on one reading, indicates divine control of all events with the exception of some degree of human freedom.[[3]](#footnote-3) Some have attributed (to my mind mistakenly) something like this attitude to the Ramban in his commentary on the Torah – we will return to the Ramban in the next shiur. In 19th century *Chasidut* (e.g., Rebbe Nachman of Breslov but also many others) the notion of divine *hashgacha* reached its apogee – in this school of thought we find expressions that seem to deny the reality of nature altogether.[[4]](#footnote-4)

# God and Nature: the Rambam

I have already mentioned one downside of this extreme understanding of *hashgacha*. If everything that happens is by God's intention, then the endeavor to understand the nature of things, perhaps best realized in scientific investigation, loses much of its meaning. There is a further difficulty which I will only mention. If everything that happens is the will of God in the most immediate sense, the problem of evil becomes all the more pronounced. God must be conceived as not merely allowing evil but as actually performing it. One of the reasons for resisting such an all-encompassing conception of *hashgacha* might be an unwillingness to attribute evil-doing to God.

The Rambam offers an extremely different conception of *hashgacha* than that described above. The Rambam is concerned to redeem the separation between God and nature and allow for the possibility that many things just happen as a function of the way the world is, including extremely complex causal processes. For the Rambam, this embrace of nature is part of his resistance to idolatry in all its manifestations. There is no ordinary intentionality in nature and its attribution to natural forces is part of the pagan worldview that the Torah (and philosophy) seeks to uproot. In addition, part of the Rambam's response to the problem of evil involves the idea that some evils are the inevitable result of natural processes – that is just the way the world is, and such evils cannot be attributed to God.[[5]](#footnote-5)

At the same time, the Rambam is concerned that his commitment to the existence of the natural realm as an object of (what we call) scientific investigation does not lead to a total dislocation of God from the world such that divine concern and *hashgacha* become meaningless. How does he negotiate the tension between a robust conception of nature as fundamentally causal and mechanistic with the reality of divine concern and involvement?

The aspect of the Rambam's conception of *hashgacha* that is most surprising to modern readers is that he identifies *hashgacha* with divine causation. [[6]](#footnote-6) *Hashgacha*, providence, is expressed through the divine plan for the nature of the world. God, as the Creator of the world, created every species to behave according to its nature and insofar as it does so, we regard its behavior to be an act of providence. As one would expect from the Rambam, this is a far more transcendent conception of providence than the image of the heavenly Father who worries about His creation, but it is precisely that image that the Rambam is concerned to uproot. God is not, according to the Rambam, some kind of super-human. He is radically different from us and He relates to the world not as part of it but as its Creator. All of nature is thus an expression of *hashgacha*.

According to the Aristotelian physics with which the Rambam operates, though God made the universe and all that is in it, He is not in control or even aware of everything that happens. Natural events are the result of the natural causes so that on the level of species, everything is caused, and all behavior is explainable as God's will. However, on the level of individual particulars, the material manifestation of species introduces a random element. Thus, when a particular leaf falls from a tree or a spider devours a fly, God is neither aware nor in control of those events – they are merely random expressions of the nature of the world.[[7]](#footnote-7)

There is no reason for us to accept the details of the Rambam's physics and we can adjust his understanding of *hashgacha* to fit our science. Our scientific conceptions have a lot less randomness (at least above the quantum level) and understand natural processes mechanistically, but there is no barrier to accepting the Rambam's central insight that God as Creator made the universe in a particular way and as such everything that proceeds from the nature of the world is in accordance with His will. For the Rambam there is no conflict between *hashgacha* and nature. Rather, *hashgacha* *is* nature.

# The Rambam's Understanding of Miracles

This naturalistic conception of *hashgacha* extends to miracles as well: miracles are not interruptions in natural processes in which God intervenes, as if He is another character in the story. Rather, God created the world such that at the appropriate moments, phenomena that appear miraculous will occur. These events are built-in to the natural order rather than divergences from it. The Rambam interprets the following mishna in *Avot* to be making this very point:

Ten things were created on Friday *bein ha-shemashot* [between sunset and dusk]. The mouth of the earth; the mouth of the well; the mouth of the ass; the rainbow; the manna; the rod [of Moses]; the shamir-worm [a magical worm that could cut stone]; the characters; the writing; and the tablets. And some say, the spirits also; Moshe's grave; and the ram of Avraham our father. ….[[8]](#footnote-8)

According to the Rambam, this is not a list of miracles that were part of the original creation as opposed to others; rather, these were particularly exceptional miracles and the mishna makes this point by saying that they were created *bein ha-shemashot* as the very last things created. All other miracles were created before *bein ha-shemashot*. God does not interact with human beings like a pagan god with a human-like personality. He is the creator and source of all and it is in that that divine concern is manifest.

The Rambam's understanding of *hashgacha* allows us to preserve a scientific conception of nature as fundamentally self-sustaining processes that proceed one from another causally. God is able to participate in these processes and act in history, at least in a manner of speaking, because He is the all-knowing Creator – He created nature with its law-like processes and inserted into that creation divergences from those laws where appropriate. We should not underestimate the achievement of the Rambam's vision. The scientific worldview, that presumes that natural processes can be explained by means of articulating laws of nature, is one of humanity's greatest achievements. Very often, this worldview is conceived of as antagonistic to religion, as if once we have a scientific explanation for something we no longer need God. The Rambam's understanding of *hashgacha* turns this shallow scientific atheism on its head: scientific achievement and the ongoing endeavor to further it, i.e., the discovery and refinement of the laws of nature is the discovery of the will of God.[[9]](#footnote-9)

# A Prelude to the Next *Shiur*

I have left out a very central aspect of the discussion of *hashgacha* and, unfortunately, space considerations demand that I save it for the next *shiur*. The Rambam's vision of God's concern for the world and its inhabitants as fully realized in the act of creation does not appear to leave a great deal of room either for human freedom or for *hashgacha peratit*, divine concern for individual humans and their actions. If human beings are merely puppet-like products of the divine will, or, alternatively, the particulars of their existence are outside the divine purview, then it is hard to find anything that meaningful. Our sense that how we behave and what we strive for matters in some way is called into question. The Rambam was well aware of these problems. He is passionately committed to human freedom and explains how his understanding of *hashgacha* makes room for that with a novel and disturbing conception of *hashgacha peratit.* In the next *shiur* we will discuss these and whether they are satisfying. I will also present another understanding of *hashgacha* which is found in the Ramban.

1. Esther 4:14. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Berakhot* 33b. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Of course there are a wide range of possible readings of this aphorism, but the notion that God is involved in the everyday mechanics of nature is not limited to that phrase. The first *berakha* recited prior to *keri’at* *shema,* in which we praise God for creating the light generating heavenly bodies, can also be readily understood as God maintaining the world in every moment. I have already discussed this idea briefly in an earlier shiur, see <http://vbm-torah.org/archive/faith/05faith.htm>. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. I am well aware that I am selling the *Chasidic* tradition short, partly because it not an area in which I have any expertise. *Chasidut* is a deep, rich, and far from monolithic source of religious thought and there is much to be learned from it. Some generalizations about it can be made, however, and one of them would involve the tendency to emphasize divine power and immanent presence at the expense of both human independence and, all the more so, at the expense of natural process. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See *Guide of the Perplexed*, III:12. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The Rambam's approach to *hashgacha* is elucidated in the *Guide* III:17. This topic has been written about at length and I cannot give but the barest outline of it here. For a modern overview with references, see <http://philosophy.ucsd.edu/_files/watkins-conference/nadler.pdf>. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The examples cited here are those that the Rambam uses. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Mishna *Avot* 5:6. See the Rambam's commentary. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Rav Soloveitchik was particularly taken with this insight of the Rambam's and the idea that natural processes are expressions of God's will. See, for one example amongst many, his reading of *Tehillim* 107 in *Worship of the Heart*. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)