**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

**ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)**

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**Topics in Hashkafa**

**Rav Assaf Bednarsh**

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In loving memory of Rabbi Dr. Barrett (Chaim Dov) Broyde ztz"l

הוֹלֵךְ תָּמִים וּפֹעֵל צֶדֶק וְדֹבֵר אֱמֶת בִּלְבָבוֹ

Steven Weiner & Lisa Wise

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**Shiur #07: Divine Providence and the Natural Order 2**

Adapted by Leora Bednarsh

**Divine Providence and the Natural Order 2**

In the [previous *shiur*](https://etzion.org.il/en/shiur-06-divine-providence-and-natural-order-1), we discussed the basic tension between believing that God provides all our neccesities and the need for human effort to work within the natural order. The evidence that we see with our eyes leads us to believe that there is a natural order, as expressed in the laws of cause and effect. If we do something, it statistically produces an effect. On the other hand, religious people generally believe in the doctrine of *hashgacha pratit*, Divine Providence – that everything happens because it is decreed from above. This seems to leave no room for working through the natural order, because if everything is decreed by God, then it doesn’t make a difference if one works or not. If God decides that we will earn a certain amount of money, then that will happen regardless of our efforts. Therefore, there is no point in going to work and there is no point believing in the scientific laws of cause and effect. After all, if God wants us to live, then it doesn’t matter if we drive without wearing a seatbelt or if we play in traffic, because whatever God wants will happen.

In the previous *shiur*, we discussed the theory of the Ramban and the Rambam, who maintain that Divine Providence is not universal. Only the righteous enjoy consistent Divine Providence. Regular people who are not particularly righteous have less Divine Providence, and therefore must fend for themselves within the natural order. The Torah expects us to work for a living, to conscript armies and fight wars, and in general to work in the natural order, because not everyone is on the level at which they enjoy consistent Divine Providence.

The radically opposite approach believes that everything that happens to us is purely the result of Divine Providence and not the workings of the natural scientific order. This position is found throughout the *Rishonim* and *Acharonim,* particularly in those philosophical works characterized as *mussar* literature.

**The Approach of the *Chovot Ha-Levavot***

Rabbeinu Bachya ibn Pakuda is one of the earliest of the medieval philosophers who denies the causative power of the natural order (*Sha’ar Ha-Bitachon*, ch. 3-4). He tells us that our annual income is not at all a function of how hard or how skillfully we work. The *gemara* in *Beitza* (16a) teaches that a person’s income is fixed on Rosh Hashana for the following year, based on a Divine judgment of his righteousness or wickedness. If everything that happens to you is decreed by God as a judgment based on your righteousness, then it doesn’t really matter if you work, or how much you work, what you do, or how skillfully.

Rabbeinu Bachya then asks why the Torah and *Chazal* assume that people are supposed to go out and work for a living. After all, working an extra hour or an hour less should not affect one’s annual salary, which was decreed by God on Rosh Hashana. Perhaps learning more Torah or performing *mitzvot* might help, because then God might grant a person a better judgment. But working harder or working smarter or choosing a different profession will not affect his income. Why, then, does God want us to work for a living?

According to Rabbeinu Bachya, this is merely the result of two technical considerations. God wants to test us as to whether we will follow the Torah or not. If we don’t need to work for a living, how will we be able to pass the test of not stealing when we are tempted to do so, or not working on Shabbatwhen we are tempted to do so? God gave us this system of working for a living, not as an effective way to produce income, but rather in order to test us and see whether we will keep the *mitzvot*. Will I steal, or will I have faith that God will provide for me without theft? Will I work seven days a week or six days a week? Of course, I will make the same amount of money either way, because working more does not lead to earning more money. But I will prove myself to be a *rasha* or a *tzaddik*.

The second reason God wants us to work to earn a living is because God knows that most people are unable to occupy themselves all day with Torah and *mitzvot*. Most people, if they were given a leisurely lifestyle with no worldly responsibilities, would end up doing *aveirot*. They would engage in idle philosophical speculation and end up becoming heretics. They would party, drink, and chase after forbidden pleasures. A leisurely lifestyle is very dangerous for the average person. God told us to work for a living to keep us out of trouble, so that we would not waste away our time in inappropriate pursuits.

However, says the *Chovot Ha-Levavot*, it is not working for a living that produces income. God produces income. Working for a living simply gives us an opportunity to pass some tests and keeps us out of trouble. Therefore, if someone is already righteous – if he does not need these tests because he would certainly not steal or work on Shabbat and he would utilize his leisure time for Torah study rather than inappropriate behavior or idle speculation – then he does not need to work for a living. God arranges the world in such a way that those people who need to work for a living feel that need. But those *tzaddikim* who have already passed all the tests and don’t need to be kept out of trouble will be provided for by God in such a way that they will not have to work for a living. The ideal is not to work but to spend our time learning Torah and performing *mitzvot*. This is the lifestyle that God arranges for the righteous.

One fascinating result of this approach concerns the way in which a person should choose a profession. According to Rabbeinu Bachya, one should choose a profession that he naturally gravitates towards, without regard for potential income. Money comes from Divine Providence and not from work. If you feel that a certain profession is right for you, then God must want you to engage in that profession; the decision will in no way affect your income, which in any case is according to God’s decree.[[1]](#footnote-1)

**The Approach of the *Mesillat Yesharim***

R. Moshe Chaim Luzzatto (Padua, Italy, 1707–1746), in his seminal work *Mesillat Yesharim* (ch. 21), takes this approach one step further. According to the *Mesillat Yesharim*, one achieves piety through *bitachon*, trust in God, which means recognizing that everything that we have comes from God and not from ourselves. Working more doesn’t earn us money; rather, God gives us what we need based on His infinitely complex judgment. But the need to work for a living, the Ramchal explains, is the curse of man as a result of the primordial sin in the Garden of Eden. The *midrash* deduces from the verse “God will bless all of your handiwork” (*Devarim* 14:29) that if you sit idly by, God will not give you anything, but if you work, God will bless your work.[[2]](#footnote-2) One could understand this *midrash* as advocating hard, diligent work together with God’s blessing. But the *Mesillat Yesharim* says otherwise. He points out that the *midrash* doesn’t say that work brings income; the *midrash* says that God’s blessing brings income. You simply must do some work in order for God to bless you. God punished Adam and his descendants when he ate from the forbidden fruit, and it would be insubordinate not to accept the Divine punishment.

The Ramchal summarizes his position with an explication of that which was implicit in the *Chovot Ha-Levavot*: Working through the natural order does not accomplish anything (*mo’il*), but it is something that we must do because God said we must (*mukhrach*). If we don’t work, we will incur God’s anger and He will not bless us, but the work itself has no causative power.

To understand this distinction between *mo’il* and *mukhrach*, imagine that you end up in traffic court and the judge decrees that you must pay a fine, but he does not say how much you must pay. How much should you pay? It doesn’t matter. You don’t get anything for your money; it is simply a fine. A normal person would not pay a large sum of money in this situation; he would pay a minimal amount. If payment is simply a matter of a penalty, why would anyone pay more than the bare minimum? The same is true, saysthe Ramchal, when it comes to work. Work is our traffic ticket, our penalty for the sin in Gan Eden. But the Torah never specifies how much we must work. Only a fool would work full-time with diligence and effort! The Ramchal therefore advises us not to be fools and to work only the minimum amount possible. Once we work a little, we have paid our penalty and accepted the judgment for what happened in *Parashat Bereishit*, and we can expect that God will give us what we deserve. We can then earn the same income that we would have if we worked all day long, spending the rest of our time performing *mitzvot*, learning Torah, and trying to acquire the critical trait of piety.

**The Position of R. Eliyahu Dessler**

In his famous *mussar* work *Michtav Mei-Eliyahu* (vol. 1, pp. 178-188), R. Eliyahu Dessler, perhaps the greatest philosopher of twentieth century ultra-Orthodoxy, takes this approach to its logical extreme, explicitly denying the existence of the laws of nature. According to R. Dessler, the distinction between miracle and nature is artificial, because everything is a miracle. There is no cause and effect built into nature; the only cause and effect is that God causes every effect! Scientists think that there are laws of science, but in truth, anything that happens is the direct, unmediated result of God’s will. It seems as if reality corresponds to what we understand to be the laws of cause and effect. But R. Dessler denies the existence of these laws.[[3]](#footnote-3)

This position is the next step in a continuum that follows the train of thought of the *Mesillat Yesharim*, which goes back to that of the *Chovot Ha-Levavot* and beyond that to many statements in *Chazal*. What we mistakenly call the laws of nature are simply those things that, for whatever reason, God wants to happen similarly time and time again. What we mistakenly call a “miracle” is simply the kind of thing that God decides should happen once and not many other times. There is only the will of God; there is no other cause.

R. Dessler even goes so far as to describe the belief in laws of nature as tantamount to polytheism, as such a belief holds that things can be caused either by God or by the laws of nature – or more pointedly, either by God or by oneself acting according to the laws of nature to bring about the results that one wants. The belief that things can be caused by anything other than direct Divine Providence is seen as contradicting the unity and omnipotence of God. If God is the one, true, all-powerful God, then He runs everything, and there is no room for any other explanation of events. Even those who believe that God works through nature are dangerously mistaken, in R. Dessler’s opinion, because God’s will is automatically manifested in the physical world, without need for intermediary causes.

R. Dessler believes that the most pernicious evil in the world is the mistaken notion that there are rules of nature. If the entire world was created to glorify God and the one factor that keeps people from acknowledging God is the belief in the laws of nature, then nothing can be worse than that belief.

According to this philosophy, why does it appear that the world runs according to the laws of science? R. Dessler explains that God put us on this world to pass tests and withstand temptation, and part of the Divine plan for the world is the temptation to believe in nature. The laws of nature are nothing more than an illusion, an elaborate hoax, and God purposely made this illusion in order to test us. We fail the test by ascribing reality to the illusion, and we pass the test by seeing through the illusion and recognizing that there is no cause in the universe but God.

R. Dessler takes this concept to its logical extreme, implicitly addressing the objection of the Rambam. In the previous *shiur*, we mentioned the Rambam’s critique of those who do not believe in working for their sustenance but nonetheless eat when they are hungry instead of trusting that God will satiate them without food. R. Dessler agrees that someone who eats because they fear malnutrition is lacking in his belief. Theoretically, someone who truly believes in God should stop eating, and God would keep him alive without food if He so desired. Indeed, this is precisely what Moshe did for forty days on Har Sinai. But what would happen if a *tzaddik* stopped eating and drinking entirely and nevertheless lived? It would be reported in the press and people would flock from all over the world to see him. It would be obvious to people that it is God who runs the world and not the laws of nature, and there would no longer be a strong temptation to believe in the laws of nature. The purpose of this world, which is to test us, would be frustrated. Therefore, even the righteous eat and drink, in order to keep up the illusion for everyone else. The only reason a believer would engage in natural effort (*hishtadlut*) is to keep up the illusion so that others can still be tested.

According to R. Dessler, this the first of two possible justifications of working for a living. In order not to give away the truth and to give people an opportunity to exercise free will in choosing what to believe, the righteous pretend to work for a living. Therefore, the righteous should work just enough to keep up the illusion. He quotes the famed R. Zundl of Salant, who said that his efforts consisted of buying a lottery ticket. However much money God wants him to have, He will give him via the lottery, and even if R. Zundl became a millionaire, people could say that he got lucky and maintain their illusions. Every true believer should follow this path and work only enough to keep up the illusion and not require open miracles, so that people can freely choose to accept or deny the truth of Divine Providence.

Of course, R. Dessler knew that many religious Jews worked a lot more than R. Zundl of Salant, and the Torah certainly describes Jews doing significantly more work than just buying a lottery ticket. He therefore suggests a second technical reason to work for a living – to counter our own evil inclinations. Everyone knows exactly how deep his religious commitment is, and in accordance with the strength of his faith, he should minimize work and maximize reliance on God. On the other hand, one whose faith is not as strong as R. Zundl’s should not minimize his efforts entirely, because if perchance he does not make an adequate living without working (which, of course, is the result of Divine Providence and not his lack of work), he may resent his decision to rely on God and perhaps lose his religion entirely. Reliance on God today is certainly not worth the price of becoming irreligious tomorrow.

Accordingly, R. Dessler’s advice to the students in his yeshiva was to recognize that nothing you do makes any difference; everything comes from God, and therefore, there is no need to work. However, if your faith is not so strong, you should work just enough so that in moments of weakness you will not be tempted to blame your reliance on God for your predicament. For example, a student who is deciding whether to attend university will be told that if he knows that if he doesn’t get a degree and ends up poor, he may resent it later and blame his religious education for his poverty, then he should go to university. But otherwise, there is no justification for such a course of action, and he should rest content in the belief that he will earn the same amount of money regardless of his career path.

**Summary**

What unites the Jewish philosophers quoted above is the denial of the natural order. If God is omnipotent, then He does everything, and if God does everything, then why would He choose to not be involved, as the Rambam and the Ramban suggest? Unlike a human, God has unlimited resources; He doesn’t have to choose what to pay attention to, as He can do everything at once! Therefore, if God determines everything, the fundamental task of a Jew is to recognize that there is no nature and there are no laws of cause and effect. There is only the will of God. The only thing a Jew should do is learn Torah and perform *mitzvot*. Nonetheless, there are technical reasons to work according to the Torah tradition – to distract us and to test us (*Chovot Ha-Levavot*), or to pay the penalty for the sin of our ancestor Adam (*Mesillat Yesharim*), or in order to give others an excuse to believe in nature so as not to ruin the test (R. Zundl of Salant), or so as not to test ourselves too much and lead us to a crisis of faith (R. Dessler).[[4]](#footnote-4) The one illegitimate reason for engaging in work is the belief that it is effective in producing income.

This theory, while religiously attractive and seemingly conducive to religious growth, is difficult to accept. We may be reluctant to accept the idea that all the laws of nature, and the very concept of cause and effect, are an illusion and a hoax. After all, God’s seal is truth, and we would hope that He would not create a world that is merely one big lie. In the next *shiur*, we will present a middle approach, which will show that it is possible to see Divine Providence manifest in everyday life for the average person and simultaneously believe in the workings of the natural order.

1. See Kiddushin 82a. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See *Midrash Tehillim* and *Yalkut Shimoni* to *Tehillim* 136; *Tanna De-Vei Eliyahu Rabba* 15. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. This is similar to the philosophy of David Hume, who likewise denies the rationality of cause and effect. He holds that the fact that the sun rose every morning until now does not constitute a logical proof that it will rise tomorrow morning. However, while Hume and his followers did not apply this insight to practical decision-making, most contemporary Orthodox Jewish thinkers follow the approach of R. Dessler and assume that we should base our practical decisions upon a denial of scientific causality. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. There are many comments of Rashi on *Chumash* that fit with this approach. For example, the Torah tells us to build a fence around a roof so that no one falls from it (*Devarim* 22:8). Doesn’t that imply, as the *Sefer Ha-Chinuch* (*mitzva* 556) says, that there is a natural order? Rashi comments: “*Megalgalin chova al yedei chayav*.” It is not that people fall because I didn’t make a fence around my roof. Rather, not building the fence was a sin. The punishment for that sin is that God makes someone who was already destined to die fall from my roof, and I must suffer the unpleasantness of having a death associated with my property. Rashi seems to imply that even if at times we see that people who engage in dangerous behavior are more likely to die or to get injured, that is not because of the natural order, but rather because they violated the *mitzva* of protecting themselves from danger. The punishment for violating the *mitzva* of protecting oneself from danger is that the danger might come to fruition by a mishap. It is not because in the natural order dangerous behavior leads to mishap and safe behavior leads to security. Keeping the Torah and *mitzvot* leads to security, and committing sin leads to mishap and tragedy. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)