**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

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

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**Topics in Hashkafa**

**Rav Assaf Bednarsh**

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This shiur is dedicated in memory of Israel Koschitzky zt"l, whose yahrzeit falls on the 19th of Kislev. May the world-wide dissemination of Torah through the VBM be a fitting tribute to a man whose lifetime achievements exemplified the love of Eretz Yisrael and Torat Yisrael.

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**Shiur #08: Divine Providence and the Natural Order 3**

Adapted by Leora Bednarsh

This chapter will conclude our three-part discussion of *hashgacha pratit,* the issue of to what extent our success in life is a function of Divine Providence or a function of our hard work and diligence in working within the natural order.

We saw the positions of the Rambam and Ramban, who concur that the natural order works on its own, and God is only occasionally involved or constantly involved only for the very righteous. Since we are not all on the level to deserve constant Divine Providence, then we must work within the natural order. On the other side of the spectrum we saw the approach of Rav Dessler, who denies the existence of the natural order. We can expect our lot to improve only if we improve our standing in God's eyes. Our effort should therefore be in strengthening our Torah and *mitzvo*t.

Each theory has its advantages and disadvantages. The first theory corresponds with our common sense and our experience of cause and effect in the physical world, while the second appeals to our religious intuition that God’s Providence is always present in our lives. In this chapter we will attempt to chart a middle course, according to which, on the one hand, we believe in the natural order and work within it; but on the other hand, we believe that God is involved in everything that happens in our lives.

**Theory of Dual Causation — Rav Yosef Albo**

Many Jewish philosophers assume that both the natural order and Divine Providence play a causative role in our life. Rav Yosef Albo, in his *Sefer Ha-ikkarim,*[[1]](#footnote-1) explains the workings of Divine Providence using the parable of a farmer. If a farmer plants a seed, and it doesn't rain, he yields nothing. If it rains and he doesn't plant a seed, he will also get nothing. But if he plants a seed and it rains, then he will grow crops and make a living.

Some things, such as the fulfillment of *mitzvot*, are purely the result of our decisions and hard work. Other things happen purely based on fate and Divine Providence. Most things,[[2]](#footnote-2) though, are similar to the parable of the farmer. They occur because of the confluence of two factors, our hard work and Divine Providence, and both factors are necessary conditions for the result to occur. Therefore, he says, both *hishtadlut* (effort) and *charitzut* (diligence) are critical.

The philosophers we discussed in the last chapter,[[3]](#footnote-3) while they begrudgingly find a role for *hishtadlut,* do not consider diligence to be significant, and they would have us put all of our effort into service of and reliance on God. Rav Albo, however, holds that diligent work is always appropriate in all areas of life. Not only should we work diligently at performing *mitzvot*, but we should also work diligently at making a living and providing for our physical needs. As it says in Mishlei*, “Ve-yad charutzim ta’ashir,” “*The hand of the diligent makes wealth.”[[4]](#footnote-4) In order to get rich, one must be diligent, not just sit and wait for God to provide, because God has chosen to work through the laws of nature, *be-derekh ha-teva.* Even when God decides to bless someone with wealth or health, that blessing flows via the natural order, in the form of gracing one’s efforts with success. However, that blessing has no way to take effect if one does not make the effort to perform those actions which, if successful, could lead to the desired result.

A second parable can help us understand dual causation. Imagine a simple electric circuit with two switches. If both switches are on, the current flows. If either switch is off, the current cannot flow. If that circuit represents our sustenance and accomplishing what we want to accomplish in this world, then both switches need to be on for the current to work. In most circumstances, we will only get whatever we deserve based on a combination of our hard work *be-derekh ha-teva* and Divine Providence.

If this is how the world works, then we should conclude that people who do not work hard rarely succeed. People who work hard sometimes succeed and sometimes do not. This in fact corresponds with reality. Working hard is generally a necessary but not sufficient condition for success. Even when God wants to bless us, He only wants to do so if we work diligently. The more diligently we work, the more Divine bounty we will be able to access.

The Psalmist states,[[5]](#footnote-5) “If the Lord will not guard a city, its watchman keeps his vigil in vain.” While one could have understood this verse as denying the efficacy of human initiative in defending our cities and urging us to rely solely on divine protection, Rav Albo points out that a close reading of this verse proves the opposite. Only “if the Lord will not guard a city”, then the soldiers manning the observation posts guard in vain, which implies that if God does guard a city, then the watchmen guard effectively. This proves that no amount of hard work will succeed without divine assistance, but even when we merit divine assistance, we will only succeed if we also work through natural means to provide a channel for Divine Providence to reach us.

Rav Albo explains further that the only way to see the hand of God in one’s life is not to sit idly, but rather to work hard. If unfortunately, one works hard yet still receives a negative outcome, then he may conclude that he has not found favor in God's eyes. However, without working hard, he has no way to know if he has found favor in God's eyes, because he will fail either way.

In the parable of the electric circuit, if you turn on the first switch, then you can look at the lightbulb and tell whether the second switch is on or off; but if the first light switch is off, then there is no way to tell whether the second switch is on or off, because the bulb will remain dark either way.

Thus, concludes Rav Albo, if one works hard and succeeds, then he knows that God is giving him a stamp of approval. If he fails, then he will have to take stock and realize that God is sending him a message that He expects better from him, and he will have to improve his spiritual state. However, the only way to get either positive or negative feedback from God is to do one’s part and then see if God does His part. According to Rav Albo, then, hard work is useful whether God wants to help us or not.

Of course, as discussed in previous chapters on the question of theodicy, it is not always the case that God rewards the righteous and punishes the wicked in this world. God has many considerations which influence the way in which He exercises Divine Providence. Nonetheless, if we work and are successful, then we know that we are doing well in God's complex scheme of things. If we do not, then we don't necessarily know that we are utterly wicked, but we do know that we are not yet righteous enough to overcome our fate; and that if we improve our spirituality, then we can earn more divine assistance and ultimately succeed.

Rav Albo finds evidence for this understanding in the verse in *Tehillim*,[[6]](#footnote-6) “*Yegia kapecha ki tokhel ashrekha ve-tov lakh,” “*If you eat the fruits of your labor,” then according to the interpretation of *Chazal,*[[7]](#footnote-7) “you are fortunate” in this world, “and you are well-off” in the World to Come. If we work and succeed, we know we have found favor in God's eyes. We do well in this world, and we know that we are in good shape for the next world. Still, only if we work can we see what God thinks of us and receive these messages from Above.

**Rabbenu Bachya ben Asher**

Rabbenu Bachya ben Asher[[8]](#footnote-8), in his commentary to the beginning of *Parashat* *Shelach*, likewise explains that while the ultimate salvation comes only from Divine Providence, one cannot expect Divine assistance if one does not first work with all one’s might within the natural order. Rabbenu Bachya explains, “*Ha-nes eino chal ela be-chisaron ha-teva,” “*God performs miracles only to complete what cannot be accomplished by natural means.”

He additionally explains why, if God is omnipotent, He does not normally help us outside of the natural order: “*Ikkar yetzirat ha-adam banui al middat ha-teva,”* “The essential nature of man is built on the natural order.” Of course, God could choose to run the world without the intermediary of nature, but God chose to create man, and the entire physical world, as a world of nature. He already had heavenly realms populated by supernatural beings before the foundations of the earth were laid. He created man specifically because He wanted to create natural beings who would achieve spiritual heights, and therefore chose to interact with us through nature in order to preserve our natural mode of existence.

One important difference between Rav Albo and Rabbenu Bachya, however, lies in the audience whom they are addressing. Rav Albo believes that all people should work diligently to achieve their goals via natural means, and pray that God grace their efforts with success.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Rabbenu Bachya,[[10]](#footnote-10) however, quotes a *midrash* which teaches that Yosef was punished with two additional years of imprisonment for the sin of asking the butler to help release him from prison instead of placing his trust purely in God.[[11]](#footnote-11) He explains that there are various levels of trust in God, and that the highest level is abandonment of all natural effort and reliance on God alone. For those rarefied individuals who achieve this level of faith, any human effort constitutes a flaw in their faith, and is considered a sin.[[12]](#footnote-12)

According to Rabbenu Bachya, then, while for most people, God exercises Providence through the conduit of nature, the most righteous individuals transcend the natural order and rely on direct Divine Providence.

**Summary**

The model presented in this *shiur* acknowledges that the natural order really exists and that the statistics don't lie. On the other hand, we all know from experience that one needs a lot of "good luck" or, we would say, Divine Providence, in order to succeed in the world. Both factors influence the ultimate result, because we need both factors in order to succeed, and we can therefore attribute causative power to both human effort and Divine Providence.

God is omniscient and omnipotent, but He has chosen to channel His involvement within the natural order, because He decided, in His infinite wisdom, to create a natural world. He works within that natural order, by waiting for us to work within the natural order and then deciding whether that work will succeed or not.

We also pointed out a compromise position of Rabbenu Bachya, in which this is true only for regular people, but the spiritual elite merit Divine Providence without involving the natural order.[[13]](#footnote-13)

For most of us, in any case, the upshot is that, firstly, if we want to have a good afterlife then we need only worry about doing the *mitzvot*; but if we want to have a good life in this world as well (which we need in order to keep doing *mitzvot* and merit a good afterlife), then we have to be diligent in working through the natural order, as well as in the performance of the *mitzvot*.

Secondly, if we want to see the hand of God in our life, we don't have to sit back and wait to see what He does. Rather, we should put in the effort and work within the natural order, and if our work is blessed, then we see God's hand; if, unfortunately, our work does not succeed, then we see God's hand as well. In the first case, we will encourage ourselves to keep up the path we have chosen. In the second, we will encourage ourselves to improve and hope to merit better Divine Providence.

In my subjective experience, I find this approach very attractive. The impression we get from the Torah, which corresponds to our intuition, is that the natural order actually exists, and also that God is constantly involved in running the world. If so, then we must admit that the way God involves Himself is through the natural order that He created.

1. Book 4, Ch. 5-6. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Rav Albo admits that occasionally, God wills a certain result to occur regardless of human initiative, as we see in a number of biblical and rabbinic stories; but he asserts that this occurs only sometimes, and most of the time, God exercises Providence only in conjunction with the laws of nature. Rav Yitzchak Arama (*Akeidat Yitzchak*, beginning of *Parashat Vayishlach*), who presents a similar approach to that in *Sefer Ha-ikkarim,* explains that an individual can expect to succeed without significant effort only if he is both righteous and possesses a positive fate. Since most people are not particularly righteous, and even a righteous person must account for the possibility that he has a negative fate, Rav Arama concludes that every individual is obligated to work diligently via natural means, as does Yaakov in preparation for his encounter with Esav. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The value of *charitzut* is explicitly denied in *Mesillat Yesharim* and *Mikhtav Me-Eliyahu* [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *Mishlei* 10:4. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *Tehillim* 127:1. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *Tehillim* 128:2. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. BT *Berakhot* 8a. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Rabbenu Bachya ben Asher (Spain, 1255-1340), student of the Rashba and author of the Torah commentary known by his name and the philosophical work *Kad Ha-kemach*, should not be confused with the earlier philosopher Rabbenu Bachya ibn Pakuda (Spain, c. 1050-1120), author of *Chovot Ha-levavot*. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. *Akeidat Yitzchak* (ibid.) also writes explicitly that everyone should assume that he needs to work via the natural order in order to succeed, and that this does not constitute a flaw in one’s trust in God. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Beginning of *Parashat Miketz.* [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. See, however, *Keli Yakar* (*Bereishit* 40:23), which asserts that everyone is obligated to work within the natural order, and interprets this *midrash* as faulting Yosef not for asking the butler to help win his release, but for the way in which he formulated his request. See also the Chazon Ish’s *Emuna U-vitachon,* ch. 2 sec. 6, where it is also explained that this *midrash* does not deny the general need to work within the natural order. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. In later generations, this interpretation of the *midrash* was popularized by Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik in his *Beit Ha-Levi* on *Parashat Miketz*. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. One could also suggest a different compromise, i.e., that the righteous experience Divine Providence mediated through the natural order, while those who are not righteous do not merit Divine Providence at all. This may be the opinion of the Rambam. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)