

## CHAPTER 7

### Divine Intervention

One of the basic tenets of Classical Judaism is the belief in divine providence. After bringing the world into existence, God continues to guide it toward its ultimate destiny; nothing that transpires in the world can happen contrary to the will of God. At the same time, we believe that people have choice and free will and that they are accountable for the choices they make. How do these seemingly contradictory concepts coexist?

Can one person kill another if God has not decreed that the victim should die? The Torah describes the plan of Joseph's brothers to kill him and his rescue by Reuven (Bereishis 37:20-21), "And they said to each other, 'Here comes the dreamer, and now, let us kill him and toss him into one of the pits, and we will say that a wild animal devoured him, and then we will see what becomes of his dreams,' and Reuven heard, and he rescued him from them, and he said, 'Let us not strike him a mortal wound.'" Did Reuven really rescue Joseph? Would he have died if Reuven had not intervened?

The Or Hachaim famously writes, “Reuven did indeed rescue him. People have free will. They can even kill a person who does not deserve to die.” There are also opposing views in the rabbinic literature. It is not my purpose here to discuss the relative merits of the different approaches. I would just like to present what I believe to be the Rambam’s view.

According to the Rambam,<sup>1</sup> God does not interfere in the existence of animals or plants. He does not decree that a certain leaf should fall from a certain tree or that a certain fish should swallow a certain worm. These events occur according to chance. If a deer is running in the forest and a tree falls and kills him, that does not mean that God decreed that the deer should die at that particular time. It does not mean that He directed the tree to fall and that the deer should be there when it falls. Nature operates by chance. It just so happened that the tree fell at that moment, and it just so happened that the deer was passing at that moment.

People, however, are protected by divine providence, but the protection depends on their level of intellectual connection to God. The closer they are to God, the greater the level of protection extended to them. People who are ignorant and distant from God are like the deer running in the forest. They are at risk of being hit by a falling tree.

The Talmud mentions a similar limitation of protection.<sup>2</sup> We are told that *shluhei mitzvah einam nizakin*, people on a mission to perform good deeds are protected from harm. However, if they travel through particularly dangerous areas, they are not protected. Clearly, people who do not have special protection are vulnerable to chance even if they do not deserve to be punished.

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<sup>1</sup> *Guide*, Part III, Chapters 17-18, 51.

<sup>2</sup> Pesachim 8b.

At the same time, the Talmud tells us elsewhere<sup>3</sup> that no person pokes his finger or stubs his toe in this world unless it is so decreed from Above. How do we reconcile these two passages in the Talmud? If all harm comes by divine decree, why would an innocent person on a charitable mission be at risk in a dangerous neighborhood?

The answer is that God is all-knowing. He knows everything that is happening in the world or that has happened or that will happen even if by chance. Nothing escapes His attention. If God sees that a deer will have a chance encounter with a falling tree, He does not intervene. He leaves the lower creatures to chance.

If, on the other hand, He sees a human being heading toward a chance encounter with a falling tree, He makes a decision. Should He intervene or should He not intervene? If He chooses not to intervene, that is considered “a decree from Above.” It is a decree by inaction. A person on a charitable mission deserves divine protection from chance encounters with ordinary dangers. God will intervene to protect him. However, if this person exposes himself to extraordinary dangers, God does not promise to intervene. He may or He may not, depending on the level of his closeness to Him.

Therefore, it is possible that someone should exercise his free will and kill an innocent person. God may choose not to intervene. Joseph’s brothers conspired to kill him, and if Reuven had not heard about their plot and stopped them, Joseph might have died. Why didn’t God intervene? That is a subject for a different discussion.

Continuing from the viewpoint of the Rambam, the question arises, how does God intervene when He chooses to do so? The Rambam states that

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<sup>3</sup> Chulin 7b.

once God set nature into motion, He does not perform miracles to override the natural course of events.<sup>4</sup>

According to the Rambam, all miracles that occur are already built into nature. After all, what are natural forces if not divine decrees? For instance, how does a force of nature like gravity work? If you try to explain gravity by other forces of nature, such as the strong force or the weak force or the electromagnetic force, the question then moves to those forces, how do they work? And so on and so on, without ever reaching a point where there is no longer a need for explanation. Eventually, you have to concede that the essential natural forces are unexplainable divine decrees.

The sea split for the Jewish people emerging from bondage in Egypt, because God had already built into nature that at that point in the future the sea would split. Other than seemingly miraculous events built into nature from the time of creation, God does not perform miracles to supersede nature. That is the Rambam's opinion. How then does God steer world events or intervene to protect individuals without resorting to miracles?

There are two methods. One is revealed in the verse, "The heart of a king is in the hand of God."<sup>5</sup> This refers not only to an actual king but also to any powerful person whose decisions and actions affect the general society. What does this mean? According the Rambam, God sometimes plants thoughts in a person's mind.<sup>6</sup> This is not supernatural but akin to prophecy. The eleven levels of prophecy are the result of communication between God and the person worthy of receiving prophecy. But even if a person is despicable and unworthy of receiving prophecy, God may make a thought suddenly appear in his mind without any communication.

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<sup>4</sup> Commentary on Avos 5:5.

<sup>5</sup> Proverbs 21:1.

<sup>6</sup> *Guide*, Part II, Chapter 41.

In this way, God directs the course of history. He plants thoughts in the minds of people in positions of great power. This does not mean that a king, president, minister or captain of industry does not have free will. He does. But on occasion, God plants a thought in his mind to steer him away from the course of action he was contemplating.

God did not plant genocidal thoughts in Hitler's mind, but He did choose not to plant positive thoughts in his mind to counter his evil intentions. This is called *hester panim*, the hiding of the face, whereby He leaves people to their own devices and does not intervene. It leaves society vulnerable to the most evil designs of ruthless, bloodthirsty and immoral people. It is the harshest decree possible.<sup>7</sup> God decision to hide His face during the Holocaust is a discussion for the later chapters of this book.

This method of intervention is not supernatural. But the question remains, how does God prevent a falling tree from killing a worthy person passing just at that moment without performing a miracle to override nature? How does God deliver a seemingly miraculous cure to a person afflicted with a deadly illness?

The answer can be found, I believe, in the first verse of the Torah. "In the beginning, the Lord created the heavens and the earth."<sup>8</sup> The word *elohim*, lord, does not necessarily refer to God. It can also refer to judges or powerful people. When it is used in reference to God, it is not actually the Name of His essence. It indicates His conduct of the world through *midas hadin*, the attribute of strict justice.<sup>9</sup> The Tetragrammaton, however, the Name composed of the letters *yod*, *heh*, *vav* and *heh*, is God's ineffable Name. It is exclusive to God, denoting His unknowable essence and, as

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<sup>7</sup> Devarim 31:18; Rashi, Yeshayahu 8:17.

<sup>8</sup> Bereishis 1:1.

<sup>9</sup> *Guide*, Part I, Chapter 2

such, is a proper noun. The other Names are common nouns indicating actions that have their counterpart in the created world. They are effectively adjectives, so to speak.<sup>10</sup> The use of this Name indicates the *midas harachamim*, God's attribute of mercy.

In the first verse of the Torah, we are told that the Lord created the heavens and the earth. In a later verse, we are told, "These are the chronicles of the heavens and the earth when they were created on the day the Lord God made the earth and the heavens."<sup>11</sup> Why is the Lord used in the first mention of creation and the combination of both Names used in the second mention of creation?

Rashi in his commentary on the first verse explains, "It says that the Lord created. It does not say that God created. God first thought to create the world with the attribute of strict justice, but He saw that the world could not survive in this way. Therefore, He brought forward the attribute of mercy and combined it with the attribute of strict justice, as it is written, On the day the Lord God made the earth and the heavens."

Many questions immediately spring to mind. How is it conceivable that the all-knowing, all-wise God devised an original plan for creation, but then came to the realization that it wouldn't work? How is it conceivable that God originally planned to conduct the world without mercy, to punish sinners without giving them the opportunity to repent and atone? Is that what a merciful God would do? And what does Rashi mean by his statement that God brought forward the attribute of mercy? From where did He bring it forward?

The explanation, I believe, is that God certainly intended to treat people with mercy, that He never considered not allowing sinners to repent and

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., Chapter 61.

<sup>11</sup> Bereishis 2:4.

seek forgiveness. But there were still no people in the world at the point of creation. Humankind was not created until the sixth day. In the beginning, God created only the physical world of the heavens and the earth, and He installed the laws of nature.

When God decides to create a world, it should ideally be a perfect mechanism, a world that operates with strict justice, meaning perfect cause and effect. A car that always starts immediately when you turn the key is a strict justice machine. A car that sometimes starts and sometimes doesn't is not a strict justice machine.

“God first thought” means that His decision to create the physical world should have been divinely executed with perfect cause and effect, but He knew that the world of people could not survive if the physical world operated on perfect cause and effect. In such a world, if a person's sins caused him to become mortally ill, he would inevitably die. Barring a miracle, he could never recover even if he repented and was forgiven. Even if, contrary to the opinion of the Rambam, God does make miracles, who is worthy of God overriding nature on His behalf?

Therefore, God brought forward the attribute of mercy that would be active with the appearance of humankind, and He combined it with the attribute of strict justice in the creation of the physical world. In quantum mechanics, there is something known as the uncertainty principle. There is a randomness in nature that is observable on the atomic level. Therefore, God can manipulate the randomness in nature and cure the sinner without performing visible miracles. Why is there randomness in nature? Why doesn't it operate with perfect cause and effect? It is because God introduced the attribute of mercy, which is not bound by perfect cause and effect, into the creation of the physical world.

God controls the physical world by manipulating the randomness in nature. He controls the social world by planting thoughts into the minds of the great and powerful when He chooses to do so.