**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 #05: Theodicy (2)**

Adapted by Leora Bednarsh

In the [previous *shiur*](https://etzion.org.il/en/shiur-04-theodicy-1), we discussed three approaches to explain the apparent lack of justice in the world. One, attributed to the friends of Iyov but prohibited by Halakha and mostly foreign to Jewish philosophy, is that suffering is always proportional to sin. We see that this is not correct from the conclusion of the story of Iyov, when God rebukes his friends for misunderstanding His ways. The mainstream approach, taken by the Ramban and others, claims that all prosperity is a reward for *mitzvot* and all suffering is a punishment for sin, but the reason we witness apparent injustice in this world is because we only see this world; we don’t see the next world, *Olam Ha-Ba.*When a righteous person suffers it is to enable him to receive only reward in the next world. The third approach focuses on *yissurin shel ahava*: Sometimes the righteous suffer for their own good.

In this *shiur*, we will explore a more radical approach – that perhaps not everything that happens to someone is in direct response to one’s actions. Sometimes a *tzaddik* suffers because that is simply how the world works.

**Fate**

This religiously counterintuitive approach is in fact explicit in the *gemara*. In *Moed Katan* 28a, Rava makes a surprising statement: One’s lifespan, family, and economic success (which, as the Ritva points out, includes basically all that befalls someone in this world) are not dependent on merit, but rather on fate (“*mazal*”). Rava’s proof for this statement is the example of his two mentors, the great *Amora’im* Rabba and R. Chisda. They were both so incredibly righteous that in times of drought, either one of them could pray and immediately bring rainfall. R. Chisda lived ninety-two years and married off sixty children, and he was very wealthy. Rabba, on the other hand, died at the relatively young age of forty, buried his children, and was exceedingly poor, struggling to find a piece of bread to eat. How can it be that two equally righteous *tzaddikim* had such different lives? Rava concludes that it must be that the quality of one’s life is a function of fate and not merit.

Several commentaries choose to ignore this *gemara*, or, like the Meiri (*Moed Katan* 28a, s.v. *le-olam*), reject Rava’s statement. The Meiri goes so far as to say that such a thought is religiously untenable and cannot be tolerated by any religious philosophy; it must be a minority opinion that is rejected by mainstream Judaism. The Ran (*Chiddushei Ha-Ran*, *Moed Katan* 28a, s.v. *amar Rava*) also concludes by rejecting this *gemara*. Although he does give credence to Rava’s statement, the Ran claims that the conclusion of the *gemara* in *Shabbat* 156 – that astrological fate does not control the destiny of a Jew – overrules Rava’s conclusion.

This group of commentaries represented by the Meiri and the Ran preserves the traditional philosophical stance that everything that befalls us in this world is somehow God’s reaction to our deeds; ultimately, good things happen to those who do *mitzvot* and bad things to those who sin. However, the simple reading of the *gemara* would have us believe that one’s lot in life is merely a function of blind fate.

**Combination of Fate and Merit**

The Ran raises the possibility that Rava’s statement needs to be attenuated. Of course, our actions, deeds, and merit affect our lives, as is indicated in the Torah in many places.[[1]](#footnote-1) However, our success and happiness are also a function of fate. The Ran suggests that what happens to us is partly a function of fate and partly a function of our deeds. How would this system work?

Tosafot (*Moed Katan* 28a, s.v. *ela*) suggest that sometimes our merits can overcome and nullify our fate, and sometimes they cannot. The Ritva (*Moed Katan* 28a, s.v. *lav zekhuta*) and R. Yosef Albo (*Sefer Ha-Ikarim* 4:13) explain that everyone is born with a certain fate. If one is born with a neutral fate, if he does *mitzvot*, he will have a better life, and if he sins, he will suffer. Someone born with a positive fate can afford to be spiritually mediocre, as long as he does not sin enough to override his fate. And someone born with a terrible fate would need tremendous merit in order to override that fate. Even a righteous lifestyle might not be strong enough to escape the suffering decreed by his fate, unless his righteousness was exceedingly transcendent.

According to this theory, we can imagine life as a big ruler, with the bottom of the ruler, 0, representing the worst possible life, and 100 representing the best possible life. Everyone is born with a fate, some at the bottom, some at the top, and many somewhere in the middle. One’s merits do not place him on the ruler, but rather move his position up or down. If you start somewhere in the middle, then your merits and sins make a big difference, moving you up or down. If you start out, luckily, all the way on top, then even if you go down a little you will still have a good life, so long as you are not completely wicked. And if you start way on the bottom, then you need a lot of merit even to move to the halfway mark. To have a good life under those circumstances you might need to be the next Moshe Rabbeinu!

According to the Ritva and *Sefer* *Ha-Ikarim*, although Rabba was a tremendous *tzaddik*, his fate was so negative that even his great merits were not enough to move him up to a decent life. R. Chisda, in contrast, was born with a good fate, or even somewhere in the middle, but with his great merits he was able to earn the reward of a great life.

The advantage of this theory is that it explains why sometimes the fate that befalls someone cannot be understood based on his merits. There is an inscrutable fate that we cannot understand that provides the starting point for what kind of life we will live. On the other hand, this theory preserves the basic Torah premise that if we do *mitzvot* our lot will improve and if we do *aveirot* our lives will be made more unpleasant. It simply changes the Torah’s promise from, “If you are good you will have a good life and if you are bad you will have a bad life,” to, “If you are good you will have a better life than you would have otherwise, and if you are bad you will have a worse life than you would have otherwise.” Of course, someone may sin and experience a worse life than he would have otherwise, but he will still end up with a good life because his fate was so extraordinarily good. Or perhaps, like Rabba, someone may be good and have a better life than he would have otherwise, but will still be miserable because he was born with such an extraordinarily bad fate. This approach preserves the basic premise of most religious philosophy – that we will be rewarded and punished according to our deeds.

According to this theory, when we see how others, or even ourselves, succeed or fail, we can never know exactly how much of our success or misfortune is due to fate and how much is due to merit or lack thereof. We can only know that wherever we stand now, we can move up by earning more merit through the performance of *mitzvot* and we are in danger of sliding down if we transgress the Torah.

Of course, this theory still must explain why God would assign a certain fate to everyone that has no correlation with individual merit. We would have to say that this is an aspect of the inscrutable manner in which God runs His universe. He has His own reasons why certain things must work out in certain ways, and we are not meant to understand the secrets of the universe.

**The Rambam on Divine Providence**

Another, even more radical approach is that of the Rambam at the end of the *Moreh Nevukhim*.The Rambam goes through the various theories as to how God runs the world and metes out Divine justice. He concludes that the mainstream opinion of Jewish philosophy, supported by the simple reading of *Tanakh* and most of our Sages, is that everything that happens is a function of God’s justice; any misfortunes are the result of sins, and any positive phenomenon befall an individual as a reward for his good deeds (III:17). However, at the very end of the *Moreh Nevuchim* (III:51), the Rambam shares a secret. He explains that Divine Providence is a function of intelligence. Unintelligent species do not have Divine Providence; human beings have individual providence only because of their intelligence. The extent of God’s involvement is someone’s life is therefore proportional to how much a person actualizes his intelligence by learning and understanding theological truth. The more a person thinks about and connects to God, the more God thinks about and connects to him.

The Rambam clearly believes that Divine Providence is mechanistic; if we connect to God, then He connects to us and is involved in our lives. Therefore, the Rambam says, an accomplished philosopher and theologian who meditates and thinks about God all the time will be the beneficiary of constant, intense Divine Providence. Those who are righteous and for whom God is an important but not constant presence in their minds merit a lower level of Divine Providence. Those irreligious people who never think about God merit no Divine Providence whatsoever.

The Rambam adds that even among sages and prophets, who are perfect in their knowledge and understanding of the Torah, there are still moments when their minds wander and are distracted by other pursuits and they neglect to think about God. Even the most righteous of the righteous, in a moment of forgetfulness, loses his Divine Providence. The new insight that the Rambam shares with us here is that Divine Providence is not only a function of a person’s total lifestyle, but rather varies from moment to moment; God only exercises full providence at the moments when one is connecting with Him. Suffering can thus befall the righteous in a moment when he neglects to think about God. At that moment, he is left to luck, to chance, to his own abilities and talents. He is left on his own to navigate the cruel world in which we live, and he may therefore very well encounter misfortune and suffering.

The Rambam here severely limits the role of Divine Providence in the world. It only fully applies to the righteous at the moments in which they are thinking of God. The rest of the time, the world runs mechanically, in a scientific fashion, without Divine interference.

This theory eliminates the entire problem of the suffering of the righteous. If God is only involved in the world at certain times, then the rest of the time anything can happen! It is not a flaw in Divine Providence if bad things should happen to good people. It is just the world running its course.

Even the Rambam himself knew that this theory is radical, which may be why he waited until the end of the *Moreh Nevukhim* to share it; it is reserved for those who moved thirty-four chapters past the mainstream approach of Jewish philosophy and made it until the very end of the book. This apparently was the Rambam’s own religious philosophy.[[2]](#footnote-2) The Rambam felt comfortable answering that there is not always justice in the world because not everything is a product of God’s specific involvement in the world. God is only involved to the extent that we specifically involve Him by connecting ourselves to Him through the practice of constant awareness of the Divine – “*shiviti Hashem le-negdi tamid.*”

**Summary**

These theories are important not only for theodicy, but for understanding our relationship with God and where we see God’s involvement in the world. According to those theories that view everything as a result of Divine Providence, everything that happens in one’s life is done directly by God, and it is ultimately what is best for the person at that time. The Talmud in *Moed Katan*, according to most *Rishonim*, takes a middle approach. Everything that happens is both the result of Divine Providence and a function of the natural structure of the world and the inscrutable ways of fate. I must look at what happens to me as a function of two factors, and I can never be exactly sure how much to ascribe to nature and how much to ascribe to God’s direct involvement, but I do know that God’s direct involvement is always a factor. The Rambam takes an even more radical approach, arguing that for the spiritually unaccomplished, what happens to us is a function of nature. Only in certain circumstances, at times that we meditate on the nature of God, can it be said that whatever befalls us is as a result of Divine Providence.

This is not just a theoretical question of explaining why bad things happen to good people, but is a basic question of the religious experience. Do we attribute everything that happens in the world as a direct act of God? Do we see everything that happens of some combination of God’s involvement and the natural workings of the world? Or, perhaps, do we see much of what happens as the natural order and God’s involvement as much more the exception than the rule? Of course, even according to the Rambam, our goal is to bring God into our lives and thereby merit constant Divine Providence.

This issue is thus connected to the very practical philosophical issue of whether we should lead our lives by working within the natural order or by relying on Divine Providence, which transcends the natural order. We will examine this topic in the next *shiur*.

1. See, for example, *Vayikra*,ch. 26; *Devarim*, chs. 11, 28. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Already in III:17, Rambam wrote that he would share his own opinion in addition to that of mainstream Jewish philosophy, and he mentioned that in his opinion Divine Providence was connected to intelligence, but he did not explain the far-reaching implications of this opinion until III:51. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)