**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 #06: Divine Providence and the Natural Order 1**

Adapted by Leora Bednarsh

Should one attempt to provide for one’s needs in this world by working through the natural order, or should one do so by keeping *mitzvot* and trusting in God to provide? Are the events of this world caused by direct Divine Providence or by the natural scientific order? This question has tremendous practical significance and is the subject of much debate in the contemporary Jewish community. This topic is often portrayed as “*hishtadlut* (effort)vs. *bitachon* (trust).”

On the one hand, there are those who feel very strongly that what God wants from us in this world is to work through the natural order (*teva* in philosophical Hebrew). On the individual level, this means getting a job and working for a living. On the national level, it may translate into a Zionist orientation; we should have a state and an army and defend ourselves.

On the other side of the spectrum there are those who maintain equally strongly that true belief in God is the recognition that God controls everything. The only guarantee that we have is that God rewards the righteous and punishes the wicked. Therefore, if we want our needs provided for, our efforts should be directed towards Torah and *mitzvot*; we should build faith that God will provide. On the national level, according to this opinion, it is misguided to put resources into the state or the army or other attempts to defend ourselves and secure our well-being through natural means. Rather, we should be concentrating solely on spiritual pursuits, leaving it up to God to take care of the Jewish nation.

**“The Book of Medicine”**

This debate goes back to the time of *Chazal*, if not earlier. In *Berakhot* 35b, for example, the Sages debate whether one should work for a living or learn Torah and count on God to provide.

A good illustration of the extent of the debate relates to a *mishna* (*Pesachim* 4:9) about King Chizkiyahu of Judea, who led a religious renaissance after many years of spiritual decline. The *mishna* lists several things that he did as part of his *teshuva* movement, some of which the Rabbis agreed with and some of which they did not. One of the things the Rabbis approved of was that he confiscated the “Book of Medicine.” Rashi explains that this book was in fact a book of effective medicine; Chizkiyahu burned all the medical textbooks in order to encourage people to trust in God and not in medicine. The Rambam (*Commentary on the Mishna*, *Pesachim* 4:10) strongly objects to this idea. After all, he says, if we are hungry, do we trust in God to relieve our hunger, or do we eat? We say a blessing before and after we eat, thanking God for giving us the food, but of course we eat! Likewise, we should use medical treatment and thank God for providing us with the intelligence to progress in medical science. The Rambam therefore explains that the book that Chizkiyahu confiscated was certainly not a medical textbook; it must have been either a book of idolatrous practices or a book of poisons that was misused by people who wanted to harm their enemies. Certainly, any book of valid science and technology would be considered a boon to service of God, not an obstacle.

The Rambam believes very strongly that we should work through the natural order. It certainly sounds from the Torah that we are meant to work for a living, as it speaks of farming and plowing, building and fighting wars. We all eat food and drink water rather than sit back and wait for God to give us nutrition. If so, we should also use modern medicine, visit doctors, plant seeds, and farm for a living. Indeed, the conclusion of the aforementioned debate in the Talmud in *Berakhot* is that the path that *Chazal* suggest for the masses of Jews is to go out and work for a living.

**Contradictory Assumptions**

The basic premise of those who say that we should work in the natural order is that there is a natural order. There are laws of cause and effect. After all, if we believe in the most elementary laws of science, then we believe that if we eat, we will grow and be strong and healthy, and if we starve ourselves, we will ruin our health. We believe that if a person takes certain medicines, he will kill bacteria and heal disease. If we plant, then obviously we are statistically more likely to grow crops than if we do not. If we work for a living, then we are statistically likely to enjoy the benefit of an income, and if we do not work, then we won’t. If we want to achieve certain outcomes, such as supporting our families, then we must work through the natural order.

However, the issue is more complex, because we also believe in the doctrine of *hashgacha pratit*, personal Divine Providence. Even a superficial perusal of the Torah tells us that God gets involved in the way the world works. The doctrine of *hashgacha pratit*tells us that God is involved in every detail of the world. God is all-powerful, cares what goes on in the world, and relates to us by visiting rewards upon us or, unfortunately, by punishing us at times. If God controls everything in the world, then what happens to us depends upon the will of God. If we want success in the world, we should do *mitzvot* so that God will reward us, and we will suffer if we transgress God’s word, since God will punish us.

On the one hand, we believe in the natural order, and the Torah seems to support that belief. Things happen because of the laws of nature. On the other hand, we believe that things happen because of God. God runs the world. So if someone makes money, did he earn that money because of the laws of science? Or was it because God wanted to give him that money? The problem is that it must be one or the other. If we believe in the natural order, then things happen because we make them happen. Where is God in the equation? But if we believe that everything is controlled by God – as indicated by the statement, “the amount of money will we earn is fixed by God on Rosh Hashana” (*Beitza* 16a) – then it should not matter what we do in the natural order!

What does determine our fate? There is a significant debate on this issue among the medieval and modern Jewish philosophers. In the next two *shiurim*, we will summarize three basic schools of thought in deciding what determines what happens to us in this world – the natural order or direct Divine Providence.

**The Position of the Rambam**

No Jewish philosopher can entirely deny the doctrine of *hashgacha pratit*. There are many examples in *Tanakh* that very clearly indicate that God miraculously takes care of the righteous in this world in accordance with His Divine plan.[[1]](#footnote-1) However, almost all the cases in *Tanakh* deal with exceptionally righteous and spiritual individuals. That may be because most of *Tanakh* deals with these great individuals; these are the people we need to learn about in order to learn to be good Jews. The Rambam, however, maintains that this is not coincidence. It is not simply that these happen to be the main characters in *Tanakh*.

According to the Rambam (*Moreh Nevukhim* III:18), *hashgacha pratit* is not something that God automatically utilizes in running the world. God relates to us when we relate to Him. When we open the channel, God’s bounty flows through that channel. If we don’t bother to create those lines of communication, then He does not communicate with us either. Those who have achieved philosophical sophistication, who have studied what the Rambam understands to be the Jewish mystical philosophical tradition and focus their thoughts on God, enjoy the benefits of Divine Providence.

According to the Rambam, not all people enjoy equal Divine Providence. Those who are pious and good and religious enjoy more Divine Providence because of their understanding of God, which fuels their piety and goodness. Those who are prophets enjoy a higher level because of their deep understanding of God. Those who are on a very rarified level of philosophical spiritual achievement can be assured that God looks out for them in this world. The wicked and the religiously ignorant, however, have no such promise of Divine Providence. Even regular people who may be reasonably religious and try to think about God quite often still have not achieved that level of understanding at which they can assume that they are beneficiaries of constant direct Divine Providence.

For the Rambam, then, most people do not enjoy the benefit of direct Divine Providence all the time. Accordingly, it makes perfect sense that we are expected to work through the natural order. The natural order is the default. When we change the rules by achieving philosophical knowledge of God, our lives begin to be run by the principles of Divine Providence. But much of the time the world is run by the natural order and God does not involve Himself. Thus, we should be expected to provide for ourselves and to achieve whatever goals we feel the need to achieve by means of the natural order. The natural order is the one thing that is guaranteed. God created the world and created the scientific order as the way in which the world will run until God decides to get involved because someone let Him in to his life.[[2]](#footnote-2) And even then, God is only involved partially, to the extent that someone partially perfects themselves and meditates upon God.

Of course, this does not mean that God has no part in our lives when we do not enjoy Providence. There is still *hashgacha klalit*, general Providence. God still arranges the world generally in such a way that our needs are provided for. We say blessings, thanking God, for example, for creating fruits of the tree, but not because He created this particular fruit for me to eat today, rather because He created a wonderful world that provides for much of our needs. It is our job to appreciate that. But when I stub my toe or win the lottery, is that God’s direct intervention? According to the Rambam, most of the time it is not. Rather, it is the natural order.

**The Position of the Ramban**

It was often understood that the Ramban stands in fierce opposition to the stance of the Rambam. In two places (commentary on *Shemot* 13:16 and his *Torat Hashem Temima* sermon), the Ramban writes that a believing Jew must believe that everything that happens is a miracle. The only rule of causation is that if we do *mitzvot*,we can expect a reward, and if we transgress the Torah we can expect to be punished by God. The Ramban makes it sound like there is no natural order, but rather only the principle of *hashgacha pratit*.

Some understand the Ramban’s view solely based on what he says in these two places. However, the general approach of the Ramban is much more nuanced.

In his commentary on the *tokhecha* (*Vayikra* 26:11)*,* the Torah’s promise of rewards and punishments, the Ramban encourages us to turn to God and not to doctors for healing. He states that when the masses of the Jews are perfect, their lives will not be run by the natural order, but rather directly by God; He will be their doctor. According to Ramban, that is what the righteous did in the days of *Tanakh*, during the era of prophecy. Anyone with access to prophecy does not need a doctor, and in case of illness should turn instead to a prophet, who will tell him which of his actions needs to be improved; he will then repent and repair those actions so that God will heal his disease. “What business do doctors have in the house of someone who fulfills the will of God?” asks the Ramban. Although the Rabbis interpreted the verse “*ve-rapo yerapeh*” (*Shemot* 21:19) as evidence that the doctor has permission to heal, the Ramban restricts the significance of this inference. If someone asks for help, the doctor should heal the patient – but *Chazal* never said that the patient should seek medical care, only that the doctor should provide it. The patient should ideally put all his trust in God and not in the natural order. However, if the patient has already put his trust in the natural order, the doctor has no choice but to heal him, because that is the only option left. When someone puts his faith in the natural order, his live is unfortunately run by the natural order. But when someone puts his faith in God, his life is controlled by direct Divine Providence.

**Similarities Between the Ramban and the Rambam**

The Ramban here seems to take an anti-Maimonidean stance, focusing on Divine Providence. However, on closer analysis, he does not deny the existence of the natural order. He acknowledges the existence of *teva*. Of course, he believes that it is far preferable to live by faith in God and not by *teva*, but once our spiritual level fell and we became accustomed to using medicine and working within the scientific order, God “abandoned us to the happenstance of *teva*.”

If we read the Ramban very carefully, we notice that the examples he uses of those who should not seek medical help but rather turn directly to God are limited to a time when the masses of Jews are righteous, during the time of prophecy. The Ramban is referring to people on a very high spiritual level. They enjoyed the benefit of constant Divine Providence and therefore had no business working through the natural order. The implication is that the situation is quite different for regular people in regular times. Even righteous Jew nowadays, when, unfortunately, the masses of Jews are far from perfect and when prophecy has not been restored to us, are not on the same high spiritual level. Therefore, they cannot have a reasonable expectation of constant Divine Providence in their lives, and perhaps they should visit doctors. Although everything that happens in the world is subject to Divine Providence, God has decided to abandon us – regular people in the contemporary era – to the workings of the natural order. We no longer merit constant Divine Providence.

This is, in fact, explicitly the opinion of the Ramban in several places. For example, the Ramban writes (commentary on *Bereishit* 18:19) that God exercises constant Divine Providence on Avraham because he is on a very high spiritual level.[[3]](#footnote-3) But the rest of us are left to chance, to the natural order, until the time comes when God visits reward or punishment upon us. Ramban similarly explains (*Bereishit* 32:4) that in the encounter between Esav and Yaakov, God exercised Divine Providence and saved Yaakov because of his righteousness. But Yaakov himself was not sure that he was righteous enough to enjoy Divine Providence, which is why he prepared using natural means to make peace, or if need be, war, with Esav. He made various preparations using the natural order because in his humility, he was not certain that he was on the level to expect Divine Providence. If Yaakov Avinu questioned whether he deserved Divine Providence, the clear implication is that we can certainly not rely on it!

In his commentary on *Iyov* (36:7), the Ramban writes explicitly that his understanding of Divine Providence is that of the Rambam in *Moreh Nevukhim*. He directly quotes the language of the Rambam cited above and tells us that God exercises His Providence on the righteous, but not fully on the average person, and certainly not on the wicked. Therefore, the Ramban tells us, the Torah expects us to live via the natural order. We are instructed to conscript an army and go out and fight in the event of war, not just to sit and pray and wait for God to fight for us. We cannot always expect to be on such a high spiritual level that we enjoy constant Divine Providence. Rather, we must work under the assumption that we may not always be experiencing Divine Providence, and we must therefore work under the natural order. The Ramban tells us that if God wants us to win a war, we will win without an army, and if, God forbid, He wants us to lose a war, no matter how strong our military is, we will lose. But sometimes, when we are neither completely righteous nor completely wicked, God does not want any particular result, because He is not exercising Divine Providence at that point. That is why it is so important that we work through the natural order.

The Ramban in this commentary seems to be in line with mainstream religious Zionist ideology. We work through the natural order because not everything always is decreed by God.[[4]](#footnote-4)

**Differences Between the Ramban and the Rambam**

As much as the Ramban claims to agree with the Rambam, there is still a significant difference between their philosophies. The Ramban in a number of places, including his commentary to *Iyov*, tells us that Divine Providence can be either positive or negative. If someone is truly righteous, then God watches and guards him all the time. If someone is evil, God will intervene in the world to punish him. Those in the middle, neither wicked nor righteous, are left to the natural order. The Rambam, on the other hand, holds that Divine Providence can only be positive, not negative. It is purely a function of one’s connection to God. Therefore, the more connected one is to God, the more Divine Providence; the more disconnected one is, the less Divine Providence. Punishment only occurs in this world because when God removes His Providence, one is exposed to the many perils of the dangerous world that we inhabit. While the Ramban has a volitional model of Divine Providence, in which God decides to exercise Providence when a person deserves reward or punishment, the Rambam has a more mechanistic model, under which Divine Providence is an automatic result of spiritual achievement.

What the Rambam and the Ramban have in common, however, is their belief that while Divine Providence is an ideal to strive for, it is not the default, automatic way in which the world works. God sometimes involves Himself through the principle of *hashgacha pratit*, but often does not. The natural order is the authentic way in which God created the world to run when He doesn’t decide to get involved and change things.

For the Ramban and the Rambam, then, the answer to the question of faith (*bitachon*) versus effort (*hishtadlut*) is clear. We are expected to take care of providing our needs in this world the best we can using the natural order. None of us are arrogant enough to assume that we are so holy and righteous that we have constant Divine Providence. Of course, we strive to be more holy, spiritual, and righteous. We strive to enjoy more Divine Providence. And, at least according to the Ramban, perhaps our ultimate goal is to reach the highest spiritual levels and abandon the natural order. Nonetheless, in regular life, the Rambam and the Ramban would have us work in the natural order because we can never be certain that anything that happens to us in our lives is the result of God’s direct intervention. Our success or lack thereof may be purely a function of the natural order. Therefore, we must take care of ourselves. God is not always taking care of us, as we may not be sufficiently righteous.

**Summary**

The Rambam and the Ramban represent the first school of thought: We are commanded to work through the natural order, because while *hashgacha pratit*exists, it is limited to the righteous or to those situations in which God has decided that someone deserves a great reward or punishment. The everyday life of regular, mediocre people, try as we may, does not guarantee God’s intervention.

In the next *shiur*, we will discuss the diametrically opposed school of thought, which tells us that Divine Providence is a constant feature of the world, and we will examine the role of the natural order according to that philosophy.

1. For example, the Exodus and figures such as the Patriarchs, Daniel, and Chananya, Mishael and Azarya. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Even in this case, Rambam nowhere states that one who enjoys Divine Providence should not work within the natural order. In the next two shiurim, we will present various explanations of why even one who enjoys Divine Providence might be required to work within the natural order. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The Ramban understands God’s “knowledge” of Avraham as constant Divine Providence [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Many attempts have been made to resolve the apparent contradiction between the Ramban’s statement in his commentary to *Shemot* 13 and his sermon *Torat Hashem Temima* and his formulations in his commentaries to *Bereishit* 18 and 32 and *Iyov* 36. It seems likely that the Ramban intended to claim not that everything that happens is a miracle, but that miraculous Providence ultimately controls everything. Since even nature was created by God, Providential intervention can override the laws of nature, but the laws of nature do not restrict Divine Providence. When Providence chooses not to intervene, however, nature still follows its course. For further reading, see the original texts, as well as David Berger, “Miracles and the Natural Order in Nahmanides,” in Isadore Twersky (ed.), *Rabbi Moses Nahmanides (Ramban): Explorations in His Religious and Literary Virtuosity* (Harvard University Press, 1983), available at https://www.biblicalnaturalhistory.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/MiraclesNahmanides.pdf. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)