YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**PRINCIPLES OF FAITH**

**By Rav Joshua Amaru**

The htm version of this shiur is available at:

<http://vbm-torah.org/archive/faith/20faith.htm>

Shiur #20: Knowledge and Providence, Part I

# 1. Introduction

The Rambam's thirteen principles are arranged, in a sense, chronologically. They begin in the timeless past, with the idea of God as the source of all that exists and conclude with a principle about the future resurrection of the dead. In between, we have principles that address the nature of God and His relationship with the world, beginning with prophecy and revelation which, for the Rambam at least, are distinctly historical events. The next topic is the nature of God's relationship to the world in the present, which can be called divine providence, and is the topic of the upcoming *shiurim*. The Hebrew word for 'providence' is *hashgacha*; since 'providence' has a slightly archaic (or perhaps even a Christian) feel to it, I will use *hashgacha* from now on.

# 2. What is *Hashgacha*?

*Hashgacha* is divine concern and involvement in the universe, particularly with human beings. It necessarily involves two elements. First, in order for God to care about how people act and what they do, He must know about it; a necessary pre-condition for divine concern is divine knowledge of particulars. In a moment we will see why this was such a challenging issue in medieval religious philosophy (and in a different way today). Secondly, even assuming God's knowledge, there is still room for discussion of God's involvement in what happens. To what extent to does God intervene in history? When there is such intervention, how does it fit with the existence of laws of nature? How does it fit with human freedom? These are very central questions – perhaps the most central questions of religious thought. I do not expect to be able to say anything comprehensive about these questions and my discussion of them should be taken as no more than a very partial and idiosyncratic introduction.

Before beginning to investigate what it means that God knows what we do, I want to emphasize that religion as we know it is impossible without the understanding that there is some sort of *hashgacha*. If God does not know what people do, or knows but is indifferent, then the religious consciousness becomes nothing more than an abstract ethical obligation. It might be possible to imagine a religious consciousness based upon a general obligation to acknowledge, praise and even give thanks to the Creator of the universe, but if that Creator is indifferent, there does not seem to be much point in doing so. The foundation of any religion, and Judaism is no exception in this, is that human behavior matters to God and that there is value in forming a relationship with Him. Pagan religions sometimes viewed the relationship between people and their gods as one in which divine concern was less than noble: the gods needed to be respected and 'fed' with sacrifices for fear of reprisals, and their interest in human affairs was partial and even at times whimsical. The religious revolution of ethical monotheism that the Torah embodies, besides teaching us that God is not a projection of forces of nature but rather the source of everything, also changed the understanding of the nature of divine concern. God is not a force to be appeased for fear of reprisal. The Torah introduces us to the God who truly cares about His creation. This caring involves a divine plan for history and the demand that people not only pay their respects to the divine ritually but, first and foremost, live together ethically. The ethical becomes a religious demand. Divine concern, or *hashgacha*, is thus not limited to the maintenance of the appropriate rituals so that the divine is appeased. Instead, God's concern extends to the establishment of a real relationship with human beings which is realized in a covenant that embodies mutual commitment. All of this depends on a conception of God in which God knows and cares about what goes on.

# 3. The Medieval Problem with Divine Knowledge

The idea that God knows about and is involved in human affairs was not questioned by *Chazal*, in accordance with their acceptance of the biblical image of God as the all knowing "person" who created the world. But when Jewish thinkers began thinking within the context of Aristotelian philosophy in the Middle Ages, this conception of God became problematic for reasons that we already have discussed. The conception of God as a person who acts within time and space did not (and still does not) co-exist easily with the transcendent God of Aristotle. The response was not simply to disregard this philosophical conception of God: it was widely realized that God must be transcendent if He is not merely a force of nature. The question was then to see how the transcendent conception of God could be integrated into the immanent religious conception of God as conceived by *Chazal* and the *Tanakh* (in different but related ways).

The problem for divine knowledge lay in the Aristotelian conception of nature. In this conception, the differences between individuals of the same species (note that in Aristotelian thinking the concept of 'species' extends further than biology) are merely random effects of the realization of some form in matter. We tend to think that the differences between, say, two blades of grass (of the same species) are mostly irrelevant – the most significant thing about them is that they are both blades of grass. Aristotelian thinking expanded this way of thinking to all particulars. The only thing of interest is the forms of things – the slight differences between material manifestations of a form (i.e., particulars) are merely functions of the fact that forms manifest themselves imperfectly; the differences are merely random fluctuations. This is true not only of blades of grass but also of animals (the difference between two elephants is merely a random fluctuation). More disturbingly, it is true of people as well. The difference between one person and the next is simply the function of the degree to which a person manifests the form of being human (which is understood as having an intellect).

Now all of this looks pretty strange today, and before explaining why this posed a problem for divine knowledge, I want to explain why it does make some sense. At the basis of the style of thinking described above lies a profound insight that was later articulated by Kant in a very different way. That insight is that all knowledge is conceptual: our ability to know anything about anything is only through the concepts at our disposal. The medieval Aristotelians took this a step further and treated the *form* of something – i.e., the properties that are the organizing basis of its identity, as *essences*. Our concepts are "pictures" of these essences. The forms, or essences, are what make up the possible structure of the universe and they are the objects of knowledge. If this is true, then the fact that no two blades of grass are completely identical needs explanation; the medieval philosophers explained that when a form is manifest in matter, there is a degree of random fluctuation with regard to how the form actually appears. These differences are not objects of knowledge in any significant way because they are both random and temporary. True knowledge of something is knowledge of its form and once the form is known, there is nothing more to know.

It is clear how this way of thinking poses a challenge to the idea of God knowing, let alone caring, about individuals. Human beings live within the material world and their limited knowledge of forms (i.e., their knowledge, period) is largely formed out of their ability to extrapolate forms through reflection on their sensory experience.[[1]](#footnote-1) God, however, is outside the material world and His knowledge is not through sensory experience. God's knowledge is direct – He knows all the forms just by being God. Being transcendent, God does not have any sensory experience and is thus not in contact with the particular manifestations of the forms. For Him to be in such contact would require that He not be perfect and unchanging but rather subject to the random fluctuations of matter as well.

Though there were medieval religious thinkers who concluded that God could not possibly have knowledge of particulars,[[2]](#footnote-2) this was not the mainstream position – for good reason – and most looked to find a way to save the possibility of individual religious contact with God. Before looking at the Rambam's approach to this issue, I want to spend a moment explaining why this question is of interest to us today. After all, we think of concepts and properties as less fundamental than actual, real individuals. If God knows anything, He knows about our real selves and our real world, without being constrained by human conceptual limitations. So once we are free of the Aristotelian assumptions, there does not seem to be any problem with conceiving of God as knowing us and our actions as individuals. Is that the case?

# 4. The Modern Problem with Divine Knowledge

Many discussions of divine knowledge today focus on the question of divine foreknowledge and human freedom.[[3]](#footnote-3) I do not plan to go into that in this *shiur*; and instead I want to focus on a different question: what does it mean that God knows what we are doing? Knowledge of any sort, and certainly knowledge of people's ongoing behavior, is something that human beings have. Having knowledge of something is never a pure abstraction (and here I am disagreeing with the medieval philosophers) – it always involves the individual participating in what Wittgenstein called a 'form of life.' That is to say, what someone knows makes sense only within a context that the knower is already within. I know that grass is green; that knowledge is partly dependent on my being someone who lives in a context in which 'grass' and 'is green' are accessible concepts. Imagine aliens whose vision is in a different light spectrum. They would not have any concept of green. The context-dependence of concepts is pervasive: our ability to judge things as right and wrong, forbidden and permitted, or good and bad depends on our living in a human context where those concepts are relevant.

What this amounts to, in a theological context, is that we have a choice between 3 options.[[4]](#footnote-4)

1. In the interest of philosophical consistency and at the expense of religious content, we can claim that since God is not a person, and could not possibly live in a human context, then 'God's knowledge' is an oxymoron. I have already indicated that I think this position turns philosophical consistency into a kind of idolatry. We should not let the value (and it is a value!) of consistency impose upon us the abandonment of far more important values.

2. Alternatively, we embrace a kind of religious quietism – since divine knowledge requires that God be a sort of person, and this is impossible, we should take the notion that God knows what we are doing as no more than a vague metaphor for something we cannot really say anything about. God has the divine analog for what knowledge is for humans.

3. Finally, we can accept, in some way or another, that God is a *personal* God. In some sense that we cannot fully understand, He constrains Himself to enter into the world and to conceive it from a human perspective. This does not mean that God is not transcendent or that He exists only within the confines of nature. It means that He is also immanent – present in the world – and this immanence takes the form of God being a sort of person. As such we can comfortably describe Him as a Father, Judge or King without such statements being absurd. This option, which is to my mind the only religiously possible one, does come at a cost. The cost is that of an unresolved dialectic – we are constantly trapped between two poles of transcendence and immanence. On the one hand we are committed to the notion that God is not a person, He is outside of nature, time, and knowledge. All we do is gesture in His direction without saying anything. On the other hand, we believe in a living God, who works in the world, and is concerned with what happens there. Giving up on the first pole turns our understanding of God into either a mere force of nature or simply a very big human. Giving up on the second pole turns our understanding of God into a distant primordial Source to whom it is impossible to relate.

# 5. Conclusion

I have discussed this dialectical notion of God before – what I have added here is the fact that thinking about divine *hashgacha* brings us back to this point. It is important to emphasize that that does not bring the discussion to a close but rather reopens it in a different place. In upcoming shiurim I will discuss some of the possible ways to think of divine *hashgacha*, in light of other commitments we might have, such as to the ideas of nature and human freedom.

1. I am riding roughshod over some very complex topics and I will continue to do so below; my apologies to anyone with any knowledge of medieval or modern epistemology and metaphysics. My purpose here is not to delve into the philosophy but to give just a flavor of the issue of God's knowledge of particulars. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The most notable of them in the Jewish tradition was the philosopher and biblical commentator Rav Levi ben Gershon, known, based on his acronym, as the Ralbag. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The literature on this question is vast and no end is in sight. The point of departure for it in the Jewish tradition is the Rambam’s discussion in *Hilkhot Teshuva*, 5:5; see also the Ra’avad’s comments there. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Actually there are 4 options. The fourth is that I am just plain wrong about the problem above and God's knowledge does not require that He be a sort of person. But I do not think so. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)