YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**PRINCIPLES OF FAITH**

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Shiur #22: *Hasgacha Peratit* according to the Rambam

**1. Introduction**

In the last *shiur* before *Pesach*, I discussed the Rambam's understanding of *hashgacha* as manifest in natural processes rather than as a digression from or denial of them. As the Creator of the Universe, God is both aware and concerned with all that subsequently occurs in the universe, but that concern does not make Him part of the universe. Those events that we conceive of as God's intervention in human affairs – revelations and miracles – are not the actions of a divine “person” but rather are manifestations of the divine plan pre-ordained from Creation. As I mentioned in the previous *shiur*, the great strength of the Rambam's position is twofold: first, it preserves the notion of God as transcendent, as somehow greater than and beyond the world and not subject to influence from it (the direction of influence is only from God *to* the world and not vice versa). Furthermore, it redeems our conception of nature: things happen (and do not happen) because the world is a certain way, and that way can be described through the explication of the laws that express the regularities of natural processes. The regularity of these processes is not a function of divine indifference, says the Rambam, but is rather the means of divine concern for His creation. This basic conception is crucial in order to give meaning to scientific endeavor.

The problem with this vision is that it does not seem to make room for meaningful human action. Human beings, in contrast to God, act within the confines of time and nature. If God's concern is manifest only in the act of creation, alongside the continuous maintenance of nature (as is required in the Aristotelian picture but not in ours), then human actions are known to God only insofar as they are part of the cosmic causal process. There seem to be only two options: 1) human beings are completely part of this process, in which case we have a deterministic world in which God knows (and is concerned about) everything, but human freedom is an illusion;[[1]](#footnote-1) 2) if human beings somehow transcend the cosmic process and are independent agents, then God cannot know what they do and there cannot be *hashgacha peratit*, i.e., divine concern with individuals.

This problem is not the same as the related question of how divine foreknowledge is consistent with human freedom. I will address that famous question in a future *shiur*. This question is, in a sense, more basic. The Rambam's account of God's providence positions Him outside the world such that His understanding is not a *response* to what happens but proceeds from the fact that He is the *cause* of all that happens. Alongside his commitment to the transcendence of God and the reality of nature, the Rambam is deeply committed to human freedom. So how can there be *hashgacha peratit*, divine concern with the particularities of human behavior?

# 2. Defining the Problem

The Rambam's theory of *hashgacha peratit* (and of *hashgacha* in general) is outlined in the *Guide of the Perplexed*, part III, chapters 17-18. The interpretation of these chapters is much debated and it is not my purpose to enter into that debate here so much as to offer an account that will engage with the concerns I have brought up. In short, the Rambam's theory needs to accommodate three factors:

1. The conception of *hashgacha* as manifest in natural processes rather than as an addendum to them. God does not “watch the world and react” but rather guides (or guided[[2]](#footnote-2)) the world through being its Creator.

2. Human freedom: people are the causes of their own actions and not merely automatons carrying out a pre-ordained program.

3. *Hashgacha peratit*: people's actions matter to God and He guides the world such that righteous behavior will have positive consequences and unrighteous behavior will have negative consequences.

**3. Human Intellect as the Overflow of the Divine Intellect**

The key to understanding the Rambam's notion of *hashgacha peratit* lies in an additional factor that we have not discussed much. That is the idea that for the Rambam, God's impact upon the world is not limited to what we would call physical causation. God's impact upon the world is also manifest *intellectually*, and it is due to the "overflow" of the divine intellect that human beings themselves have intellectual abilities. In exercising our capacities to speak and reason,[[3]](#footnote-3) we act outside the frame of mere physical causation – i.e., our thoughts and actions are not reducible to behaviors ultimately explainable by the laws of physics. In this way, human beings, uniquely of all creation, transcend the physical world and gain the capacity to think and act in a manner analogous to God's thought and action. In contrast, however complex it may be, the behavior of animals is always explainable (at least in principle) by means of the laws of biology, chemistry and physics (some of which we may not know).

The ability to transcend the physical world of ordinary cause and effect and act at least to some extent independently of it does not mean that rational beings (aside from God) are not constrained by physical laws. However hard I think and reason about flying, if I jump off a tall building, I will plummet to the ground. I do not cease to be a physical being subject to the law of gravity because I have the ability to reason. However, if I think about flying in the right way, and manipulate my environment accordingly, such that I design and build a glider, I *can* avoid that plummet to the ground. The ability to design and build a glider depends upon engaging the capacity to reason and that is what allows human beings to transcend, to an extent, the usual limitations of the physical world.

According to the Rambam, the capacity to reason, the intellect, is not a natural artifact of the human species. Humans do not have intellects the way that birds have wings. Rather all intellect, all higher order mental activity, is one – it is an expression or an overflow of the divine intellect and as such is of an entirely different nature than the world of cause and effect. When using their intellects, when thinking correctly about anything, human beings are participating, so to speak, in the divine mind. They are operating, in a limited way, as creators, and not merely as creatures.[[4]](#footnote-4)

**4. Intellect as the Grasping of Substantive Truths**

We are accustomed to thinking of the human intellect as an ability, as something that people have which is neutral with regard to content. Thus someone can be a criminal genius, who uses his intellect for nefarious purposes and he is no less an intellectual giant because of it. Similarly, we can consider someone a brilliant philosopher or scientist even when she gets things wrong. In light of the above, it is clear that the Rambam did not conceive of the intellect in this way. For the Rambam, since human intellect is a partaking of the divine intellect, it is impossible that it be used for evil or that a mistake can be understood as an exercise of intellect. For the Rambam, the human intellect is not a content-neutral ability. Rather, intellectual activity is *determined* by content – when a person conceives the truth then he is sharing the mind of God and manifesting his *tzelem Elokim*, his being created in the Divine Image. Moral, religious, or scientific intellectual activity that fails to reach the truth is not intellectual activity at all according to the Rambam. It is merely a kind of animal cunning – a pale shadow of the real thing, in which a human animal in some sense misuses his capacity to share in the divine overflow. In the case of a philosophical or scientific error, this misuse is in good faith, while in the case of the criminal genius, this misuse amounts to abuse of the human potential to act in the divine image.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Human freedom arises from the human capacity to partake of the divine intellectual overflow. When people understand truly they gain the ability to act in a way that frees them from the constraints of regular physical causation. As intellectual beings, human beings not only respond to the world but can shape it in accordance with their plans and goals. When these plans and goals coincide with those of the divine, then their actions are manifestations of the divine overflow rather than caused by whatever chain of causes a person happens to be in.[[6]](#footnote-6) Due to their fundamental ability to break free of causation and act in accordance with their intellect, human beings are free and hence responsible for their actions. With all this in hand, we can turn to the Rambam's notion of *hashgacha peratit*.

**5. *Hashgacha Peratit* as a Function of Participation in the Divine Overflow**

 In the previous *shiur*, I mentioned that divine knowledge of particular individuals is a problem for the Rambam. God is outside the causal processes of the world and His knowledge stems from His being the Creator rather than from some sort of perception of what happens. Since the differences between material individuals of a species is merely a function of random fluctuation, God does not know what individual ants or the like are doing or what happens to particular sticks and stones. This ignorance is not an imperfection in God since the behavior of particulars is fundamentally not knowledge at all – knowledge involves the apprehension of the *forms* of things and God knows that completely. However, with regard to human beings, who are potentially endowed with intellects, a new channel of relationship to God is opened up. God is not merely the First Cause but also the source of the overflowing intellect. Insofar as a human being participates in the divine intellect, she is subject to *hashgacha peratit.* That is just what it means to be subject to *hashgacha peratit* – in participating in the divine mind, in experiencing true intellectual achievement, one is within God's purview. That is not to say that God is "watching over" you the way a person would but that such achievement involves a real connection with God that has positive repercussions for one's life. This *hashgacha* is partial and depends upon each individual's level of intellectual achievement – i.e., the degree to which he participates in the divine mind. So far this seems very different from ordinary notions of *hashgacha* and providence in which God guides, rewards and punishes individual people.

 Participation in the divine overflow can be regarded as divine guidance if we remind ourselves that it is divine overflow of the *intellect*. Furthermore, intellectual achievement can never be separated from moral and religious achievement according to the Rambam. So a person who has reached a certain intellectual level has also already reached a parallel (what we would call) spiritual level. These people can be said to be “watched over” by God in that their understanding, which comes from God, enables them to live their lives and guides their actions in a manner that will provide them with protection. To use an example of the Rambam's, though whether a ship will sink or a house will fall down might be a matter of pure chance, whether a particular person is on the ship or in the house is not. Divine justice is not a response to human action and the conception of God as responding to what we do is merely a metaphor. Rather, justice is immanent in human experience – reward and protection for righteousness lie in the practical wisdom associated with it that will lead a person to a successful life. Since this practical wisdom comes from God by means of the overflowing of the divine intellect, we can correctly call it *hashgacha peratit*. In accordance with one's participation in the divine intellect will one be provided with the opportunity to live one's life correctly and benefit from it. God “watches over” individuals when individuals come close to Him through participation in His intellect.

 The Rambam emphasizes that the degree of *hashgacha peratit* that one experiences is variable over individuals. Those who are closer to God, i.e., the pious intellectuals, will receive more guidance and protection than those who are far from Him. There will also be variation for a given individual over the course of his life – the degree to which one is close to God in participating in the divine intellect will be expressed in the degree of protection one receives.

 Secondly, it is important to note that in this picture, God rewards, He provides benefit and protection from the vicissitudes of chance, but He does not punish, at least in the ordinary sense of actively seeking harm. Reward and punishment are immanent in the relationship between the person and God. Insofar as one is close to God, then one will receive reward in that one is protected from brute chance. This protection is not external in the sense of God intervening to protect you. Rather it is immanent in the intellectual achievement – by grasping the truth, the pious intellectual will manage his affairs wisely and thus will (generally) be saved from harm.

The further one is from God, the more will one be subject to chance – to things that just happen. This is consistent with the possibility of an evildoer, or a total ignoramus for that matter, living a happy life. Such a person may just be lucky – the things that just happen to him or her turned out to be good things. For the Rambam, the ultimate punishment is always just to be out of God's influence –to be just another piece of the physical world.

**6. Immanent Divine Guidance**

 The picture of *hashgacha peratit* sketched above is a deeply troubling one. We are accustomed to thinking of *hashgacha peratit* as direct interference by God with the regular order of events. We think of God working within history, either in guiding events (e.g., the Exodus) or in responding to individuals' good or bad behavior (reward and punishment). Moreover, we conceive of God as an almost palpable, living presence, watching over us and caring about our actions and our relationship with Him. At times this presence is a source of comfort and solace, while at other times it is a source of fear and guilt, but the sense of such a presence seems absolutely central to religious life.

 The Rambam turns this picture on its head. God is not “there” in any meaningful sense. He is a transcendent God and His impact on the world is of an utterly different nature than the father-figure of the previous paragraph. Reward and punishment exist in the Rambam's picture, but they are not analogous to the reward and punishment of a father or a king who responds and judges our actions. Rather, the achievement of closeness to God brings about its own reward; the punishment for sin is not in some negative response but in the absence of any response. In sinning, or even in intellectual error, one removes oneself from contact with God. The punishment is divine indifference such that one has the same fate, for better or for worse, as an animal.

 I think that it is impossible for us to fully embrace or adopt the Rambam's position on *hashgacha* for two reasons. First of all, it is hard to accept the Rambam's radical intellectualism, in which connection to God is primarily a function of one's perception of truths. There are deeply religious people with a profound relationship to God who are not possessed of great intellects. If we try to soften the intellectualism, taking it to be only one aspect of how we relate to God, then we will lose sight of the divine transcendence that the Rambam was so careful to preserve. For the Rambam, the only other way that the transcendent God relates to the world, aside from being its first cause, is through the overflowing of His intellect. This overflow is far from the deliberate care that we would like to ascribe to God. It is almost an incidental side-effect that His intellect overflows into the world, granting freedom and agency to human beings.

 Aside from the radical intellectualism, the Rambam's strong commitment to the transcendence of God leaves me religiously cold. It feels, to us, like a basically secular perspective – God is not part of our lives, what we do does not "matter" to anyone but ourselves except in a very abstract sense. There is no punishment for sin except that sin is its own punishment, and likewise with reward. The living God of the Bible, who makes covenants, redeems and chastises His people, becomes just a bad metaphor. If God is as the Rambam conceives Him to be, it is very hard to imagine feeling awe or love for God, or truly giving thanks, praising, and asking Him for mercy.

 Nonetheless, I chose to spend a lot of time working out the Rambam's take on *hashgacha* because I think it offers a very important corrective to our contemporary religious sensibility on these very points. There is a tendency which is only growing stronger, particularly in Israel, to focus our religious energies on the emotional aspects of spirituality – on the *feeling* of connectedness to God, on the palpability of His presence. This tendency is a positive thing, I believe, in that it combats a pervading spiritual dryness and indifference that includes the mechanical practice of Halakha and adherence to the letter of the law with no attention to its spirit. However, this revival of spirituality often comes associated with a kind of anti-intellectualism, as if seeking God precludes serious intellectual engagement. Thinking about the Rambam’s perspective helps us to see that intellectual engagement, in God's world and in His Torah, is not the enemy of spiritual life and a relationship with God, but rather a central aspect of it. In the Middle Ages this was clear, and not only philosophers like the Rambam but also mystics and poets saw intellectual engagement as a central mode of relating to the divine.

 Engagement with the Rambam's conception of God as wholly transcendent also serves to help bridge a different gap in our lives, if incompletely. Most of us live in a largely secular world where the sense of divine involvement in our affairs can be very obscure. There is comfort to be found in appreciating how subtle that involvement might be. In the mechanical progressions of our everyday lives, the divine presence is not necessarily palpable, and the Rambam offers us an account of how it can be there nonetheless. I, at least, am uncomfortable around people who attribute nearly every event to the direct will of God, conceived as either a wrathful punisher or as loving father. The Rambam provides more space for the thought that some things just happen and though God is present, that presence can be subtle and He is not some sort of divine meddler.

 Next week I will conclude my discussion of *hashgacha*, focusing on what I take to be the less extreme position of the Ramban, which allows for a balance between the Rambam's radically transcendent God and the denial of nature altogether.

1. The relationship between determinism and human freedom is very complex and much debated and I cannot go into it here. This much can be said: from the perspective of a transcendent God, if the universe is deterministic, then human action is simply part of the cosmic processes that God created and knows about. Human action is not different, fundamentally, from the movement of planets, and human freedom, i.e., a person's ability to determine his or her actions independently of causation, is an illusion. If we assume this to be the case, then human freedom is at best a function of the limitedness of the human perspective. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The use of either present or past tense is misleading. God's guidance does not involve, according to the Rambam, reaction and response to things that happen. Rather, the fact that things happen the way they do is because God intended that they should. However, God's guidance exists in the present, and not merely in the past, because the world's existence depends upon His continuous influence. If we try to update this picture in terms of modern physics, which does not require the First Cause to be continuously present, then perhaps the past tense is more appropriate. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The relationship between speech and reason is a very deep one that I cannot go into here. At the very least, we can say that speech, i.e., the possession of a language and its conceptual apparatus, is a necessary condition for any sort of abstract thought. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Though the medieval terminology of overflow sounds either quaint or mystical, the problem of the objectivity of both logical and empirical thought –– that we can somehow grasp the world correctly, despite our subjective perspective – is very alive in contemporary philosophy. The alternative of denying objectivity tends to collapse on itself – any substantive denial of objectivity would be itself an objective claim. But *how* we can do this remains to a large extent mysterious and the possibility of it being somehow a divine gift is certainly no worse than some of the other suggestions. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. There is a real problem here, which I cannot go into, of explaining how it is possible according to the Rambam for someone to perform what looks like intellectual activity but is not because it is mistaken or wrong. The criminal mastermind or the mistaken scientist certainly seems to be acting intelligently, and the Rambam does not give us an account of what this intelligence consists in. Presumably, the answer lies in the fact that even in making a mistake or in committing a crime, a great deal of truth must be perceived, if only in the drawing of correct logical conclusions based on false premises. So the mistaken scientist and the criminal mastermind are 'sharing' the mind of God on the local level of individual judgments but their endeavors as a whole are removed from the divine overflow because of their false or evil assumptions. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. I am aware that this account is somewhat obscure but the obscurity is inherent in the material. The basic difficulty lies in the following: on the one hand, the intellect is manifest in *agency* – in the human capacity to act in accordance with his own plans and goals rather than to be merely responsive to his environment. On the other hand, as I emphasized above, mere agency in not enough to be a full manifestation of the intellect, since agency is content neutral. The Rambam is committed to a conception of the intellect as not merely the ability to potentially see the truth but as the content–full conception of the truth. If that is the case then human freedom exists only when a person gets it right – only when, by the exercise of intellect, the person participates in the divine overflow. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)