



INTRODUCING DIVINE PROVIDENCE

God's involvement in the world is without a doubt a fundamental principle of faith. And yet, remarkably, the nature and scope of divine providence is fiercely debated. In this article we seek to introduce this vital yet elusive topic. We hope you emerge not just with a better understanding of the events of world history, but with an approach to deal with the vagaries and vicissitudes you encounter in your own life.

Divine providence (*hashgacha*) is a central theme stressed throughout the Torah. Indeed, the Torah emphasizes that the primary purpose of the 10 plagues was not merely to punish the Egyptians or facilitate the Exodus, but to demonstrate God's involvement in the world.

לְמַעַן תֵּדַע כִּי אֲנִי ה' בְּקִרְבְּךָ הָאָרֶץ:

In order that you know that I am the

Lord in the midst of the earth.

Shemot 8:18

The plagues taught the world that God is not only God of the heavens, nor is He a deity who created the world but no longer interacts with it, but He is God of the earth and master of the world. While miracles overtly demonstrate providence, *hashgacha* extends beyond the blatantly supernatural. Rambam, at the end of *Moreh ha-Nevuchim* (3:54), notes that Yirmiyahu highlights this point.

אֲנִי ה' עֹשֶׂה חֶסֶד מִשְׁפָּט וְיִצְדִּיקָהּ בְּאֶרֶץ:

I am the Lord Who practices kindness, justice, and righteousness on the earth.

Yirmiyahu 9:13

Rambam comments that this verse reflects one of the Torah's foundational principles — that God did not abandon the land; He is intimately involved with it. Rambam

here indicates that His providence is not limited to miraculous punishments. It can be seen in the gentle guiding hand that escorts us throughout our lives — in His kindness, justice, and righteousness upon the land. At the same time, Rambam maintains that providence is not all-encompassing, but varies from person to person.

In Chapter 38 of *Illuminating Jewish Thought* (forthcoming), we shall explore Rambam's fascinating view about the exact scope of providence. For now, let us note that the notion of providence is assumed in so many of the Torah's stories. Throughout Scripture we encounter people beseeching God to favorably intercede on their behalf, like Yaakov did before interacting with Lavan and Eisav and Chana did when pleading for a child. Individual petitionary prayer,

which is ubiquitous throughout Torah, presumes Divine involvement in personal affairs, and that human requests can influence how He acts.

While innumerable verses speak to the nature of His involvement, let us presently consider one in particular.

גָּדַל הַעֲצָה וְרַב הָעֲלִילָה אֲשֶׁר עֵינֶיךָ פִּקְחוֹת עַל כָּל דְּרָכֵי בְּנֵי אָדָם לְתַת לְאִישׁ כְּדַרְכּוֹ וְכַפְרֵי מֵעֲלָיו:

Great in counsel and mighty in deed, Your eyes are cognizant to all the ways of mankind, to grant each man according to his ways and the consequences of his deeds.

Yirmiyahu 32:19

This verse highlights two of fundamental principles:

1. God is aware of all that happens in the world (עֵינֶיךָ פִּקְחוֹת עַל כָּל דְּרָכֵי בְּנֵי אָדָם).
2. God intervenes to ensure justice (לְתַת לְאִישׁ כְּדַרְכּוֹ וְכַפְרֵי מֵעֲלָיו).

The first principle is relatively uncomplicated — God is omniscient. The second requires analysis, since the world seems to be filled with injustice.

Statements in Chazal on Hashgacha

While Scripture refers to providence, it leaves many questions unanswered. Chazal describe the scope of providence in greater detail than Scripture, though they, too, do not outline a comprehensive approach to the topic, while many of the Rishonim do. Here, let us briefly consider several prominent sources in Talmudic literature.

ואמר ר' חנינא: אין אדם נוקף אצבעו מלמטה אלא א"כ מכריזין עליו מלמעלה, שנאמר: מה' מצעדי גבר כוננו, אדם מה יבין דרכו.

R. Chanina said: No man bruises his finger here on earth unless it was so

decreed (literally — announced) against him in heaven, for it is written: "It is from the Lord that man's goings are established" (Tehillim 37:23).

Chullin 7b

The above passage indicates a robust perspective on God's providence: even small things, such as stubbing one's toe, are the result of God's decree.¹

Another source that assumes even the smallest happenings in a person's life are divinely ordained is *Arachin* 16b. This passage considers the minimal degree of suffering (*yisurin*) that would be considered divine retribution. It concludes that even minimal frustrations (someone puts his hand into his pocket to take out three coins and he takes out but two) constitute *yisurin*. The Talmud then wonders what difference it would possibly make to know the exact degree that *yisurin* extend to (וכל כך). R. Yishmael answers that this is to teach us: "Anyone upon whom forty days have passed without any form of sufferings (*yisurin*), has received his portion in the world to come" (כל שֶׁעָבְרוּ עָלָיו אַרְבַּעִים יוֹם בְּלֹא יִסּוּרִין - קִיבַל עוֹלָמוֹ). We might have expected that divine protection from all annoyances is a good thing. Actually, the reverse is true. Anyone spared even the smallest annoyances — his shoes never untie and he always pulls from his pocket perfect change — is evidently being divinely protected in order to ensure he is compensated for his good deeds exclusively in *this* world.²

This passage presumes that even the smallest annoyances, such as pulling out the wrong number of coins, stem from God, and are in fact gifts insofar as they are intended as both (a) punishment (which thereby allow for fuller remuneration in the next world)

and (b) divine messages to encourage improvement.

Because even the most trivial irritations are divinely ordained, the Talmud admonishes that a person respond to such tribulations with repentance:

אמר רבא ואיתימא רב חסדא אם רואה אדם שיסורין באין עליו יפשפש במעשיו שנא' "נחפשה דרכינו ונחקורה ונשובה עד ה'."

Raba (some say, R. Hisda) says: If a man sees that sufferings (yisurin) visit him, let him examine his conduct. For it is said: Let us search and try our ways, and return unto the Lord.

Berachot 5a

Misinterpreting the Divine Message

While tribulations should prompt general introspection, we must be wary of offering definitive explanations of why certain things happened to us. Only through prophecy can we know definitively why God caused particular events to take place. Indeed, R. Tzadok (*Tzidkat ha-Tzadik* 39) offers a fascinating example from *Shoftim* 17:13 of the dangers of misunderstanding God's message. Micha commissioned a silver statue and made a shrine in his home, appointing one of his sons as a priest. Then, an itinerant Levi came passing by, from whose tribe come real Jewish priests. Micha was thrilled and appointed him as priest, misinterpreting his good fortune as divine approval.

וַיֹּאמֶר מִיכָה עֲתָה יִדְעֵתִי כִי יִיטִיב ה' לִי כִי הָיָה לִי הַלְוִי לְכֹהֵן.

Then said Micah: "Now know I that Hashem will do me good, seeing I have a Levite as my priest."

Micha's colossal mistake highlights the danger of interpreting God's

providence. We should not claim to understand why God harms or helps us. At the same time, the Talmud teaches us, we must respond. Excessive tribulations or no tribulations are divine reminders instructing us to examine our ways. However, we should discover our shortcomings through introspection rather than interpretation or prognostication.

Is All Suffering a Response to Sin?

Thus far we have seen how *yisurin*, whether big or small, serve two purposes. The suffering can serve as atonement for sin. Moreover, *yisurin* are a wakeup call, a divine reminder that we need to improve our ways. But this cannot be all — there are times when people experience *yisurin*, though they are pure. Thus, we must add a third component: *mazal*. The Talmud in *Mo'ed Katan 28a* notes that certain matters, such as lifespan, children, and sustenance, are not only dependent on merit but *mazal*. For instance, Rabbah and R. Chisda were both equally great sages, yet one had an exceedingly difficult life while the other's was marked by pleasantness. The Talmud concludes that the only way to justify this discrepancy is *mazal*.

Mazal should not be seen as luck or randomness, rather that the things that happen to a person, such as sickness, can happen for two types of reasons. Sometimes they are responsive, as we considered above.

For example, a person may have made certain low-level choices. God may be sending the disease to punish us for these choices, or to wake us from our slumber and encourage us to reevaluate the life we are living. God hopes, as it were, that this disease will cause us to repent and change direction.

Other times the disease may have nothing to do with the choices a person has made. Instead, the disease is meant to allow us to fulfill our mission in life. For example, this individual is uniquely suited to serve God through adversity, to remain committed despite hardship, and to teach others the degree of devotion we must have toward God. Each of us are given the tools to fulfill our *tafkid* (mission) — these tools are our *mazal*. In other words, the things we get based on our *mazal* are not random, rather they are specific.

In both instances we experience sickness for our own good, either to help us reform or to allow us to fulfill our mission. The difference is that the former is responsive (*be-zechuta talya milta*) and the latter has nothing to do with the choices a person has made, at least in this life (*be-mazla talya milta*).

Is it possible that some *yisurin* are random? The matter is subject to debate. We examine this question in Chapters 38-41 of *Illuminating Jewish Thought*.

Finally, it is worth stressing that there are aspects of *yisurin* we will never understand. We cannot, for example,

explain the suffering of the innocent or the tranquility of the wicked, אין בידינו לא משלות הרשעים ואף לא מיסורי הצדיקים (*Avot 4:15*).

Thus, while the cause of *yisurin* is not always clear, Chazal emphasize that, generally speaking, our response is. Without interpreting exactly why something happened, we must respond with reflection. *Yisurin* should trigger repentance; lack of *yisurin* should prompt us to alter our focus from one that fixates on the temporal to one guided by the eternal.

Not only should suffering prompt reflection, but salvation should as well. The Talmud (*Shabbat 121b*) informs us that escaping a near death experience, such as an encounter with a poisonous snake, indicates that one should have died (due to his sins) and was miraculously saved. This, too, should prompt not just gratitude, but repentance.³

Chazal's First Limitation on Hashgacha: Free will

While the above passages all seem to indicate that all (or nearly all) happenings are divinely ordained, other texts imply that matters are not so simple. Indeed, the Talmud itself states that, at the very least, two types of occurrences are not generally subject to providence. The first relates to free will.

Indeed, one obvious objection to the notion that God controls everything is that it seems to contradict the principle of free will. If it is the case



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that God controls everything, then what room is there for me to choose my course of action? Moreover, the notion of free will would seem to presume that a person has the capability to harm somebody else regardless of God's decree or even the victim's worthiness.

אמר רבי חנינא: הכל בידי שמים - חוץ מיראת שמים, שנאמר ועתה ישראל מה ה' אלקיך שואל מעמך כי אם ליראה.

Said R. Chanina: Everything is in the hands of God (ha-kol bi-ydei shamayim) except for fear of God (yirat shamayim), as it says, "And now, Israel, what does Hashem, your God ask of you but to fear Him."

Berachot 33b

The Talmud deduces that if *yirat shamayim* is what God asks of us, it must be in our hands. What, then, is meant by *ha-kol bi-ydei shamayim*? What remains in God's hands? Rashi explains:

כל הבא על האדם ביד הקדוש ברוך הוא; כגון ארוך, קצר, עני, עשיר, חכם, שוטה, לבן, שחור, הכל בידי שמים הוא, אבל צדיק ורשע אינו בא על ידי שמים, את זו מסר בידו של אדם, ונתן לפניו שתי דרכים, והוא יבחר לו יראת שמים.

Everything about a person is in the hands of God. For example, whether he will be tall or short, poor or rich, wise or foolish, light-skinned or dark-skinned; all this is in God's hands. However, whether he will be righteous or wicked is not determined by God; this power God granted to man, placing before him two paths, and man should choose fear of heaven.

Rashi informs us that free will does not extend to everything. In fact, many things are not in our control. Whether we will be tall or short, wealthy or impoverished, wise or foolish, etc. are largely beyond our control. This passage indicates that certain things

are in our hands (matters pertaining to *yirat shamayim*), while other matters are in God's hands.

This prompts an obvious question. Can a free agent harm someone undeserving of pain? Alternatively, will God intervene and prevent unwarranted pain, while at the same time somehow preserving the agent's freedom? This question is the subject of a major debate. Numerous thinkers, among them R. Saadya Gaon, R. Bachya ibn Pakuda, *Sefer ha-Chinuch*, Abarbanel, and Gra, seem to deny the possibility of harming someone whom God has not decreed be harmed.⁴ Others, like *Ohr ha-Chaim* and the simple reading of the Zohar, seem to disagree.

Chazal's Second Limitation on Hashgacha: Negligence

The next exception to providence relates to negligence. Chazal use identical language to present this limitation.

אמר רבי חנינא: הכל בידי שמים חוץ מצנים פחים, שנאמר: צנים פחים בדרך עקש שומר נפשו ירחק מהם.

Rabbi Chanina said, "Everything is in the hand of Heaven, except for tzinim u-pachin [cold and hot]," as it says [in Mishlei (22:5)]: "Cold and heat is in the troubled path, and one who guards his health will keep distance from them."

Bava Batra 144b

This statement indicates that it is within a person's ability to avoid cold and heat, and sicknesses that may result from exposure to extreme temperatures in winter and summer. The scope of R. Chanina's statement is subject to a dispute among Rishonim.

Rashi (*Ketubot* 30a) explains that generally speaking, a person's suffering reflects a divine decree. However,

sometimes suffering is the result of negligence. For example, if a person goes outside without a jacket, he may get sick. Tosafot (*Ketubot* 30a) add that this notion is not limited to "hot and cold," but reflects the general notion that if we do not take reasonable precautions we may be harmed due to our laxity. Thus, we may not stand next to an unstable wall. After all, "it is certainly in a person's power to kill himself." Thus, the upshot of the Gemara is that if we act safely then all suffering we experience will be the result of divine decree. If, however, we live perilously, we may bring about our own downfall.

While Tosafot take for granted that a person can harm himself, R. Elchanan Wasserman (*Kobetz Ma'amarim*) notes that R. Bachya ibn Pakuda appears to disagree. According to R. Bachya, just as a person may not kill someone unless God wishes them dead, so too one cannot kill himself if he is not meant to die.⁵ Of course, if a person freely chooses to commit suicide, they are held responsible for their offense, even though they would not have succeeded were it not for the divine decree that they die, just as a murderer is punished for the death of his victim even though God would not have allowed the victim to succumb unless his expiration had been decreed. For this reason, even R. Bachya maintains that we may not stand near an unstable wall, since failure to live safely and care for our wellbeing constitutes a sin.

What remains unclear, according to this approach, is with respect to what are *tzinim u-pachin* [cold and hot] not in God's hands. If I cannot harm others or myself without God's decree, then everything is in God's hands. Perhaps, according to R. Wasserman's

understanding, a person might get sick (though not kill himself) due to negligence, but can never harm someone else or kill himself due to divine decree.⁶

It is noteworthy that R. Chanina, who presented the expansive view on providence cited above, himself presents these two limitations.

The Mystery Remains but We Must Change

Studying the topic of providence often leaves us confused for two reasons. First, there are a number of opinions concerning the precise scope of *hashgacha*. More problematic is that it prompts the question of how God allows for the suffering of the innocent. If God is involved in history, and we know He is, then we wonder how He allows so much suffering and seeming injustice. Anyone who studies theodicy and has a sensitive heart will undoubtedly emerge befuddled. As noted, Chazal (*Avot* 4:15) acknowledge that the matter is inexplicable.

Ramban addresses this point in an enlightening way. Having extensively discussed the topic of why the righteous suffer and wicked prosper and concluded that there is indeed an aspect to the problem of evil that we cannot understand, Ramban wonders why we should even study the matter in the first place, since ultimately we must accept divine justice. His answer is that this is the attitude of fools — those who are wise always seek to understand all that can be understood, even if they know that they never will complete the task.

ואם תשאל עלינו כיון שיש ענין נעלם במשפט, ונצטרך להאמין בצדקו מצד שופט האמת יתברך ויתעלה, למה תטריח אותנו ותצוה

עלינו ללמוד הטענות שפירשנו והסוד שרמזנו, ולא נשליך הכל על הסמך שנעשה בסוף שאין לפניו לא עולה ולא שכחה אלא שכל דבריו במשפט, זו טענת הכסילים מואסי חכמה, כי נועיל לעצמנו בלמוד שהזכרנו להיותנו חכמים ויודעי אלקים יתברך מדרך הא-ל וממעשיו, ועוד נהיה מאמינים ובוטחים באמונתנו בנוגע ובעולם יותר מזולתנו.

Those who are wise always seek to understand all that can be understood, even if they know that they never will complete the task.

If you ask: since there is a hidden matter anyway... why bother studying the claims (made by the various characters in the book of Iyov) and the secret that we alluded to? This is the attitude of fools who despise wisdom. For we shall benefit ourselves through the aforementioned study by becoming wise men who know God in the manner in which He acts and in His deeds. Moreover, we shall become believers endowed with a stronger faith in Him than others.

Torat ha-Adam, Sha'ar HaGemul

We must become lovers of wisdom, and therefore we are right in studying this topic even if we fail to emerge with a satisfactory resolution.

Yet, Ramban also writes (in his introduction to *Torat ha-Adam*), that we must accept that there are mysteries too deep for the human mind to penetrate: “ideas that are elevated above all creations (i.e. that nobody understands), further than that which will be and deeper than that which was.” Nobody knows all

the answers, “So, who is a poor man [unable to comprehend] to question the king? Rather, he must justify the judgment and verify the verdict, for God is a God of justice, fortunate are those who wait for Him.” Despite all he wrote, Ramban is the first to acknowledge that the answer is incomplete, and we must acknowledge and accept our ignorance. Thus, when we encounter the unanswerable, we must trust that it is right, though we cannot imagine how.

Endnotes

1. Some Rishonim limit the scope of *hashgacha*. How might they respond to this source? There are two reasons this source is not conclusive. First, the Talmud merely states that all earthly events are announced. This does not necessarily connote providence. What, then, would be the significance of such an announcement? Meiri (*Chulin* 7b) derives from this passage a fundamental principle of faith — divine justice. Indeed, regardless of what perspective one takes concerning providence, divine justice is a principle of faith. For example, even Rambam, who maintains that many of the occurrences in a typical person's life are natural and not the result of divine decree, concedes that nothing that happens to a person is unjust. Thus, Meiri suggests that the divine announcement referred to by R. Chanina emphasizes this point. Accordingly, writes Meiri, when one experiences suffering, one must consider why he deserves this hardship and mend his ways.

The second and more important reason this passage is not definitive vis-à-vis the question of the scope of divine providence emerges when we examine its context. Briefly, as explained by R. Chaim of Volozhin, R. Chanina in the passage adjacent to the above text maintains that someone who has internalized the reality that there is nothing but God cannot be harmed by malicious spiritual forces like magic. R. Chanina lived in a reality where there is nothing but God. All that happens in the world is from God. From this perspective, the forces of evil have no power and affect. However, most people do not live in this reality. Just as the Talmud indicates that they must take precautions

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הים והעבירים וברכת אמת ואמונה מדבר בה אף על העתידות שאנו מצפים שיקיים לנו הבטחתו ואמונתו לגאלנו מיד מלכים ומיד עריצים ולשום נפשנו בחיים ולהדריכנו על במות אויבינו כל אלה הנסים התדירים תמיד: *The blessing of emet veyatziv is completely about the kindness that He did to our ancestors, whom He took out of Egypt and for whom He split the Red sea... Emet veemunah speaks about the future, that we look toward Hashem fulfilling His promises and His faithfulness to redeem us from the kingdoms and the oppressors and to give us life, to cause us to tread over the forts of our enemies, all the miracles that are with us always.*

Rashi, Berachot 12a

Emunah is a bond of love between Hashem and the Jewish people:

וְאֶרְשָׁתִּיךָ לִי לְעוֹלָם וְאֶרְשָׁתִּיךָ לִי בְצֶדֶק
 וּבְמִשְׁפָּט וּבְחֶסֶד וּבְרַחֲמִים: וְאֶרְשָׁתִּיךָ לִי
 בְּאֵמוּנָה וְיָדַעַת אֶת־ה':

And I will betroth you to me forever; I will betroth you to me in righteousness, and in judgment, and in grace, and

in mercy. I will betroth you to me in faithfulness, be'emunah; and you shall know Hashem.

Hoshea 2:21-22

However, the bond of *emunah* is not a unilateral relationship, one that only involved our loyalty to Hashem. *Emunah* also involves Hashem's loyalty to us. The Sifrei comments on the verse in Ha'azinu (Devarim 32:4) that describes Hashem as "God of faith" "*Kel Emunah*" and says that Hashem has faith in His world, which is why He created it — *Shehe'emin b'olamo uvera'o* — He believed in His world and created it (*Sifrei*, Ha'azinu Piskah 2). It is clear that the word *he'emin* does not mean "believe" in the sense of apprehending its existence, rather it means that Hashem created the world because He had (and still has) confidence that it would succeed. Hashem loyally sustains the world and ensures the continued existence of the Jewish people, because He knows that we are a good investment. We

express this idea every single morning when we end the *Modeh Ani* prayer with the phrase, *rabbah emunatecha* — abundant is Your faith. It is a very optimistic and encouraging way to start the day by affirming the fact that Hashem, our Creator has confidence and trust in us.

Our ancestors followed Hashem loyally into the desert and dwelt under His clouds of glory. They marched through the desert of our long exile and were loyal to Hashem and His Torah, and they had hope even in the darkest of times. We too, when we dwell in our *sukkot* manifest this same loyalty, confidence and hope and hence our *sukkot* may correctly be called "shelters of *emunah*." May the merit of our study of *emunah* during the night of exile bring us to the moment when we will tell of Hashem's kindness in the morning of the redemption (Rashi, *Berachot* 12a) and to see Him "spread over us His *sukkah* of peace."

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against supernatural forces such as witchcraft, so too they must take natural forces (*teva*) into account. If this interpretation is correct, then, perhaps R. Chanina's statement that no man bruises his finger here on earth unless it was so decreed against him in heaven may reflect his own personal reality; it does not definitively point to an all-encompassing providence.

2. While this passage indicates that small annoying occurrences are sometimes the result of divine providence it may not imply that all such occurrences are providential.

3. This explains the language used in *birkat ha-gomel*, הגומל לחייבים טובות שגמלני שגמלני (Who bestows good things upon the guilty, Who has bestowed every goodness upon me). Why do we call ourselves guilty? In fact, the *Shulchan Aruch* (YD 376) rules explicitly that one may not say that he has

not been punished as he deserves (לא יאמר) אדם: לא נפרעתי כפי מעשי, או כיוצא בדברים אלו, (שאל יפתח פיו לשטן), so why are we doing exactly this when we proclaim our guilt and unworthiness in *birkat ha-gomel*? The answer, however, is that in this case of a near-death experience, God has warned the person that he is deserving of punishment, and, accordingly he must take note of this, as Rashi writes: - לא הרגן בידוע שנודמנו לו להרוג אותו - והראה לו הקב"ה שחטא אלא שנעשה לו נס.

4 Some thinkers may distinguish between death, where God does not allow free will to cause the demise of someone undeserving, and other forms of pain, where free will can cause undeserved pain.

5 Along similar lines, *Tosafot Yeshanim* question Tosafot's assumption that a person can terminate their own life in light of the

Mishna in *Avot* (4:22) that states a person lives against their own will (על כרחך אתה חי).

6 It is not clear that *Chovot ha-Levavot* would even allow for that. In *Sha'ar 4, Bitachon* ch. 3, he writes:

שאין ביד אחד מהברואים להועיל את נפשו ולא להזיקה ולא לזולתו, כי אם ברשות הבורא יתברך

This line indicates that a person cannot even harm themselves without God's approval. However, one could respond simply that if a person goes out without a coat, God may allow them to get sick. Thus, their getting sick was with God's permission, but it is not *bi-dei Shamayim* in the sense that it was not part of God's initial plan. Rather, their decision to act negligently resulted in God's allowing them to get sick. However, should they have acted responsibly, then they would not get sick unless it was part of God's original plan.