



Parshat Mishpatim
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Towards the end of the *haftara* for Parashat Mishpatim, we read God's declaration conveyed through the prophet Yirmiyahu, "If I do not have a covenant of day and night, and I have not established the fixed laws of heaven and earth, then I shall likewise reject the offspring of Yaakov and My servant David" (Yirmiyahu 33:25-26). According to the plain reading of the text (as Rashi and Radak explain), God compares the permanence of His special relationship to *Am Yisrael* to that of the natural world. Just as the pattern of day and night and the laws governing the heavens and earth will always endure, so will the Jewish people forever retain their status as God's treasured nation.

Chazal, however, offered a Midrashic reading of this pair of verses, whereby the first verse reads, "If not for My covenant [that is followed] each day and night, I would not establish heaven and earth." In other words, God here declares that the existence of the universe hinges upon His covenant, namely, the Torah. This reading forms the basis of the Talmudic proverb, "If not for the Torah, heaven and earth could not be sustained" (Pesachim 68b).

Maimonides makes implicit reference to this interpretation in the third section of his *Guide for the Perplexed* (chapter 13), where he addresses the philosophical question of the purpose of creation. He cites this verse in Yirmiyahu, among other Biblical passages, as sources that have been enlisted as proof to the theory that, in Maimonides' words, "the Universe was only created for the sake of man's existence, that he might serve God." Adherents of this belief maintain that "everything that is done...is done for man's sake; even the spheres move only for his benefit, in order that his wants might be supplied." All of existence, according to this view, came into being and continues to exist solely for the purpose of allowing man the ability to properly serve his Creator – as suggested by the Midrashic reading of the aforementioned verse in Yirmiyahu.

Maimonides, however, vehemently opposes this view, noting several logical flaws in this argument. Primarily, he notes that adherents of such a theory "may be asked whether God could have created man without those previous creations... If they answer in the affirmative, that man could have been created even if, e.g., the heaven did not exist, they will be asked what is the object of these things..." Meaning, God certainly is capable of creating and sustaining the human being without the heavens, and the question thus returns as to the purpose of the heavens, which are not indispensable to man's existence. Maimonides therefore concludes that many things in the universe exist for their own sake, and not merely to serve man, and their purpose is to fulfill the will of God, a purpose which suffices as an independent, self-sustaining reason for their existence. He writes:

I consider therefore the following opinion as most correct according to the teaching of the Bible, and best in accordance with the results of philosophy;

namely, that the Universe does not exist for man's sake, but that each being exists for its own sake, and not because of some other thing. Thus we believe in the Creation, and yet need not inquire what purpose is served by each species of the existing things, because we assume that God created all parts of the Universe by His will; some for their own sake, and some for the sake of other beings... We remain firm in our belief that the whole Universe was created in accordance with the will of God, and we do not inquire for any other cause or object.

Maimonides concludes this chapter by stating:

This must be our belief when we have a correct knowledge of our own self, and comprehend the true nature of everything; we must be content, and not trouble our mind with seeking a certain final cause for things that have none, or have no other final cause but their own existence, which depends on the Will of God, or, if you prefer, on the Divine Wisdom.

Apparently, Maimonides held that when the Sages remarked that "if not for the Torah, heaven and earth could not be sustained," they intended simply to underscore the central importance of Torah, around which one's entire life must revolve. This passage is not to be taken literally, as an indication that all creation serves no other purpose than to enable man to observe the Torah. Maimonides disagrees in this regard with other prominent Jewish thinkers, including Saadia Gaon (*Belief and Opinions*, introduction to section 4).

A number of writers have observed that Maimonides here appears to contradict his own comments in the introduction to his Mishna commentary, where he states that all beings "exist only for man." He adds that while regarding beings such as edible creatures and plants and domesticated animals, their benefit for man is readily discernible, the benefited yielded by other creatures – such as inedible plants and insects – such benefit cannot be identified. Nevertheless, he insists, all creatures are in fact created for man. It is due only to our limited knowledge, Maimonides writes, that we cannot identify the practical purpose of certain parts of creation.

One fairly simple approach to reconcile these comments with Maimonides' stance in the *Guide* would be to distinguish between the creatures on earth and the heavenly beings, such as the planets and angels. In the commentary to the Mishna, Maimonides speaks only of the creatures here on earth: "One should know that all things *under the sphere of the moon* exist only for man." Maimonides here makes no comment concerning the purpose of the heavenly spheres and the like. Hence, we might simply conclude that he identified the purpose of all earthly creatures as serving the needs of man, while everything beyond the moon serves an independent purpose that cannot be ascertained. (This also appears to be the view taken by the Radak, in his commentary to Bereishit 1:26.) As a famous verse in Tehillim (115:16) declares, "The heavens – the heavens are for the Lord, but the earth He has given to human beings!" All beings here on earth are "given to human beings," created solely to enable man to fulfill his role in serving the Almighty. But as for the heavens – "the heavens are for the Lord." God created the heavenly spheres for some other purpose in accordance with the divine will, and not for the purpose of assisting man.