



LECTURE #11:  
PROVIDENCE  
Rabbi Eli Hadad

**PROVIDENCE**

1. Classifying the Various Opinions Regarding Providence
2. The Difference between Man and Animals
3. The Drowning of R. David
4. Providence by Means of the Intellect
5. The Laws of Fasting

We saw in the previous lecture that Maimonides chooses to see regularity as the fundamental format of world, rather than to view the world as an expression of a free will that constantly creates it anew. Nevertheless, he does not negate the possibility of Divine will, but only limits its expression to the moment of creation and to the few miracles that on rare occasions become necessary.

Is **individual providence** possible in a world founded upon regularity and constancy? By its very nature, individual providence reacts to the individual's actions and relates to his ways, protects him from sudden calamities and punishes him for his sins. If the world is based upon regularity and God's miraculous intervention in the world is limited to a small number of cases, how does He watch over a person's actions and respond to them?

**1. CLASSIFYING THE VARIOUS OPINIONS REGARDING PROVIDENCE**

Maimonides deals with the problem of providence in a series of chapters in the third part of his *Guide of the Perplexed* (chaps. 8-24). In chapter 17, he classifies the various views on providence and establishes his own position, but he emphasizes that these opinions "are all ancient, that is to say, opinions that have been heard at the time of the prophets." This comment seems to be alluding that the foundations of the various opinions may be found already in Scripture, and, indeed, Maimonides sees in Job and his friends representatives of the different views on providence.

The five opinions presented by Maimonides may be divided into two groups. The first group is comprised of the opinion of Epicurus that there is no providence at all, and that everything happens by chance. Maimonides does not feel challenged by this view, because, in his opinion, the regularity of the world proves that it cannot have been generated by chance alone. The position of Epicurus is scientifically unreasonable. The other four opinions accept the principle of providence, but disagree as to its nature and scope.

Aristotle limits Divine providence to the species, to the exclusion of individuals. The species are an expression of God's wisdom, and they are determined by that wisdom, and this in effect is providence. The accidental aspects of the world express the fact that the particulars of a species do not absolutely match the general regularity. Each individual exhibits deviations that are randomly assigned or arbitrarily selected. Therefore, actions that do not follow from the natural order do not stem from God's providence. Aristotle establishes his position by reflecting upon the world; therefore repeated and constant regularity reflects God's wisdom and providence, and unforeseen, accidental actions point to the fact that they do not derive from His wisdom. The view of Aristotle will be the focus of Maimonides's rebuttal.

The two other opinions cited by Maimonides are those of the Moslem philosophers: the Ash'ariyya and the Mu'tazila. The first sees all of existence as a direct result of God's **will**; everything is determined by that will, the free will of man playing no role whatsoever. According to this view, total providence wipes out all freedom, and leaves no room for man or any other creature to act of his own volition. Needless to say, Maimonides does not accept this position.

According to the second view, man is able to act of his own volition, and all of God's actions stem from **wisdom and justice**. Every injustice in the world, whether against man or beast, comes to benefit the person or the animal in the world-to-come. This principle is also unacceptable to Maimonides, though he recognizes that some Jewish sages agree with it. The issue of providence relates to this world and not to other worlds. Moreover, the very assumption that God inflicts harm in order to pay reward is an attribution of "robbery" to God,<sup>1</sup> that He is like a person who first robs his fellow man and then compensates him for what he stole from him.

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<sup>1</sup> *Guide of the Perplexed* 3:24.

The last position presented by Maimonides is that of the Torah. Maimonides does not describe it in simple fashion, but rather he describes the various positions that developed over the course of Jewish history based on the Torah. He first describes the view of the Torah itself, then the majority position among the Sages, the minority position among them, the view of the last Geonim (apparently that of R. Sa'adya Gaon) and finally his own position. We shall not describe this development, even though the very assertion that the Torah's position has undergone development is somewhat novel. Rather, we shall content ourselves with an analysis of Maimonides's interpretation of this position.

## 2. THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN MAN AND ANIMALS

Maimonides's point of departure is the Torah's distinction between man and animals regarding Divine providence. On this point all the aforementioned opinions are defective. Neither Aristotle nor the Moslem philosophers distinguish in any way between man and animals; both are governed by the same providence.

According to Aristotle, God's providence is over the species and not over individuals. Maimonides comments upon this with cynicism:

For instance, if a hurricane or a wind of less than hurricane force should blow, it would indubitably bring some leaves of this particular tree to fall, break a branch of another tree, topple a stone from a certain fence, raise up the dust so that it covers a certain plant and causes its destruction, and agitate great waves in the water **so that a ship that is there would founder and so that all the people that are on board, or at least some of them, would be drowned.** Consequently, according to them, there is no difference between the fall of the leaf and the fall of the stones, on the one hand, **and the drowning of the excellent and superior men that were on board** the ship, on the other. Similarly he does not differentiate between an ox that defecates upon a host of ants so that they die, or a building whose foundations are shaken upon all the people at their prayers who are found in it so that they die. And there is no difference, according to him, between a cat coming across a mouse and devouring it or a spider devouring a fly, on the one hand, or a ravenous lion meeting a prophet and devouring him, on the other.

According to the Ash'ariyya, everything results from God's will, whereas according to the Mu'tazila, even animals are treated justly in the same way as humans, and they too will

merit the world-to-come for their actions. Here too Maimonides relates with cynicism to this position:

Even when a flea and a louse are killed, it is necessary that they have a compensation for them from God. They say in the same way that if this mouse, which has not sinned, is devoured by a cat or a hawk, His wisdom has required this with regard to the mouse and that the latter will receive compensation in the other world for what has happened to it.

Later in the chapter, Maimonides presents his own view:

For I do not by any means believe that this particular leaf has fallen because of a providence watching over it; nor that this spider has devoured this flea because God has now decreed and willed something concerning individuals; nor that the spittle spat by Zayd has moved till it came down in one particular place upon a gnat and killed it by a Divine decree and judgment; nor that when this fish snatched this worm from the face of the water, this happened in virtue of a Divine volition concerning individuals. For all this is in my opinion due to pure chance, just as Aristotle holds.

Regarding animals, Maimonides agrees with Aristotle: Divine providence is limited to the species, to the exclusion of individuals. God established the fundamental order of the world, and animals and plants are subject to this order. Human beings, in contrast, are subject to Divine providence, each person according to his level.

According to me, as I consider the matter, Divine providence is consequent upon the Divine overflow; and the species with which this intellectual overflow is united, so that it became endowed with intellect and so that everything that is disclosed to a being endowed with the intellect was disclosed to it, is the one accompanied by divine providence, which appraises all its actions from the point of view of reward and punishment. **If, as he states, the foundering of a ship** and the drowning of those who were in it and the falling-down of a roof upon those who were in the house, are due to pure chance, **the fact that the people in the ship were on board** and that the people in the house were sitting in it is, according to our opinion, not due to chance, but to Divine will in accordance with the deserts of those people as determined in His judgments, the rule of which cannot be attained by our intellects.

### 3. THE DROWNING OF R. DAVID

Before trying to explain Maimonides's position, I would like to focus attention to one of the many examples that he offers. I refer to the example marked above in bold regarding the foundering of a ship and the drowning of those aboard, including important and distinguished people. Maimonides asserts that even if the ship foundered due to pure chance, it was not by chance that specific people had boarded it.

In light of the above, it is difficult not to recall a most traumatic event in Maimonides's life, the drowning of his brother, R. David.<sup>2</sup> In 1177, R. David drowned in the Indian Ocean, after having set out to sea on a business trip aboard a ship that also carried property belonging to Maimonides. Maimonides painfully describes the incident in a letter to R. Yefet the *dayyan*.<sup>3</sup>

And the great evil that has befallen me of late, **which is worse than any other evil that has ever befallen me to this day**, namely, the death of **the righteous man**, of blessed memory, who drowned in the Indian Ocean, together with a great fortune belonging to me, to him, and to others, leaving a young daughter and a widow with me. **And I remained for about a year following the arrival of the evil tiding, prostrate in bed, with a festering eruption, with inflammation, and with astonishment of heart, and I almost perished.** From then until today, almost eight years, I grieve and find no consolation. What should console me? Surely he was a son, growing up on my knees, and he was a brother, and he was a student. And it was he who engaged in business in the marketplace, earning a livelihood, while I lived in security. He was swift in his understanding of the Talmud, he had a keen grasp of language, and I had no joy outside of his company. All joy has turned gloomy, he has departed for eternal life, and he has left me frightened in a foreign land. Whenever I see something written in his hand or one of his books, my heart turns over and stirs my sorrow. To summarize: "I will go down to my son mourning into She'ol." Were it not for the Torah which is my delight, and the words of wisdom through which I forget my sorrow, I should have perished in my affliction.

We are certainly dealing here with the drowning of a great and distinguished person, one whom Maimonides calls "a righteous man" and whose wisdom he praises. Even if the

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<sup>2</sup> See Lecture no. 2, regarding the life and works of Maimonides.

<sup>3</sup> *Iggerot ha-Rambam*, ed. Y. Shilat, Jerusalem 1995, vol. 1, pp. 229-230.

ship foundered by chance, his brother's boarding of the ship was not by chance, but rather subject to God's providence. This providence is connected to the Divine overflow that overflowed onto the intellect of the righteous R. David. How are we to understand this providence?

#### **4. PROVIDENCE THROUGH THE INTELLECT**

It is possible to explain in simple manner that God's providence over each individual depends upon his level. This understanding, however, will lead us to the necessary conclusion that the world is full of miracles, by which God intervenes in the world in order to watch over individual people. This understanding is negated both by a precise analysis of Maimonides's wording, and by his overall conception. We shall, therefore, see that this providence watches over man **by way of the intellect itself**. A person's intellect is the overflow by means of which God watches over him as an individual. That is, a person's considerations that lead him to conduct of one type or another impact upon the results of his actions, upon his reward and punishment. Thus, in the end, a person's very decision to board a ship determines his fate.

The more a person expands his knowledge and comprehends the world in a more perfect manner, the more he will conduct himself in accordance with his intellect and reduce the injury he will suffer due to chance circumstances of the world. Absolute knowledge of the world and conduct that matches such knowledge will lead of necessity to absolute providence. Since, however, there is nobody who is not limited in his intelligence, there is nobody who is not subject in some degree to chance. We are accustomed to see God's providence over individuals in the exceptional and surprising events of our lives, but according to Maimonides the basis of providence is the natural order, on the one hand, and man's intellect which recognizes this order and coordinates himself with it, on the other. This intellect is not sealed inside a person's personality, but rather it is fed by the Divine overflow that reaches it, and this, therefore, is God's providence over him. God watches over a person by way of the overflow that overflows his intellect. The greater a person's wisdom, the more he is watched over by his intellect.

In his *Guide* (III, 12), Maimonides asserts that there is more good in the world than evil. He divides the evil found in the world into three categories:

- 1) The evil due to the materiality of nature. These evils harm man by way of natural processes, such as great natural catastrophes, earthquakes and floods, or by way of congenital deformities and illnesses. These evils are the rarest evils in the world.

2) The evils that men cause one another. These evils include wars between nations and crimes committed within a country. These evils are more numerous than those caused by nature.

3) The evils that are inflicted upon a person by his own actions. The majority of evils befalling a person are self-inflicted. These evils are far more numerous than all the other evils in the world. These evils are caused by a person's impulses that lead him to excessive eating and pursuit of luxuries, to the absence of self-control and the like.

There are three principal ways of dealing with these evils: **science, politics, and ethics**. The evils of the first type can be reduced through science and technology. The evils of the second type can be reduced through proper government and proper conducting of foreign relations and the defense establishment. The evils of the third type can be reduced by way of self-control and perfection of a person's character traits. All of these means are in man's control and all of them are dependent upon man's intellect and the way he conducts his life in accordance with it. Obviously, there are many limitations that a person must overcome, and they cannot be resolved all at once, but only by way of a continuous process of development. The evils of the first and second type do not depend upon the individual, but upon the state of science and the political regime to which he is subject. Since, however, most evils are of the third type, each individual can deal with most evils on his own, this too by way of personal processes of development and great effort. **This being the case, a person's actions determine the level of personal providence over him; God watches over the individual primarily by way of his intellect.**

The Torah relates to the last two types of evil: perfecting the state and perfecting the character traits of the individual. The messianic king is supposed to impose the political regime of the Torah and deal thereby with the evils of the second type. As Maimonides asserts, "the sole difference between the present and the messianic days is delivery from servitude to foreign powers."<sup>4</sup> The Messiah's political regime, according to the Torah, will draw in its wake desirable consequences: "At that time, there will be no famine or war, no jealousy or competition, for good will profuse greatly and all delights will be as common as dust."<sup>5</sup> There will be economic abundance and political security, that will lead also to internal social justice, without envy and competition, and without crime. Most of the other

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<sup>4</sup> *Mishne Torah, Hilkhos Teshuva* 9:2.

<sup>5</sup> *Mishne Torah, Hilkhos Melakhim* 12:5.

*mitzvot* are meant to perfect the character traits of the individual and educate him. This education is meant to lead each person, according to his level, to a reduction in his subjugation to evils of the third type.

## 5. THE LAWS OF FASTING

It is interesting to note that in the course of illustrating the evils of the third type, Maimonides mentions once again the dangers involved in setting out to sea aboard a ship in pursuit of luxuries.

For whereas all necessary things are restricted and limited, that which is superfluous is unlimited. If, for instance, your desire is directed to having silver plate, it would be better if it were of gold; some have crystal plate; and perhaps plate is procured that is made out of emeralds and rubies, whenever these stones are to be found. Thus every ignoramus who thinks worthless thoughts is always sad and despondent because he is not able to achieve the luxury attained by someone else. **In most cases such a man exposes himself to great dangers, such as arise in sea voyages** and the service of kings; his aim therein being to obtain these unnecessary luxuries. **When, however, he is stricken by misfortunes in these courses he has pursued, he complains about God's decree and predestination, and begins to put the blame on the temporal and to be astonished at the latter's injustice** in not helping him to obtain great wealth, which would permit him to procure a great deal of wine so as always to be drunk and a number of concubines adorned with gold and precious stones of various kinds so as to move him to copulate more than he is able so as to experience pleasure - as if the end of existence consisted merely in the pleasure of such an ignoble man.

Did Maimonides believe that his brother's voyage was inappropriate?

A letter written by R. David to his brother, Maimonides, has been uncovered in the Cairo *genizah*. The letter was sent from the port city of Idav in the Sudan before R. David sailed off for the Indian Ocean. We are not dealing with the same trip mentioned above, but rather with a voyage that took place in 1171. R. David tries to calm Maimonides, so that he not worry about him. The letter implies that this is the first time that R. David is setting sail for the Indian Ocean.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> See *Iggerot ha-Rambam*, ed. Y. Shilat, pp. 72-73.

An autobiographical note attributed to Maimonides mentions various dates related to his flight from Spain to Eretz Israel. One of the dates recorded there is the date of his brother's return, safe and sound, from his first voyage.

On Tuesday, the twelfth of Sivan,<sup>7</sup> **God saw my afflictions** and my brother returned safely, and I made it a day of charity and fasting.

Maimonides's great anxiety concerning his brother is clearly evident here. Moreover, before recording this date, he writes about his flight from Spain to Eretz Israel:

On Saturday night, the fourth of Iyyar, I set out to sea. On the Sabbath, the tenth of Iyyar, in the year 4925 to Creation,<sup>8</sup> a great wave almost drowned us, and the sea was raging. **I took a vow that on these two days I would fast, and conduct myself as on a full-fledged communal fast**, myself, my family, and my entire household. And I will instruct my children to do the same until the end of generations, and to give charity in accordance with their ability. **My vow included that I would sit in seclusion on the tenth of Iyyar, I would not see anybody, but rather I would pray and read all day to myself. Just as on that day at sea I found nobody but the Holy One, blessed be He, so will I not see anybody or sit with him**, unless I am compelled to do so.

And on Saturday night, the third of Sivan, I safely disboarded and arrived in Acre, and I was saved from persecution, and we reached Eretz Israel. That day **I vowed to be a day of gladness and joy, feasting and presents for the poor**, for me and my family until the end of all generations.

The dangers posed by the sea familiar to Maimonides through personal experience belong to the first class of evils, the evils of nature, which man cannot overcome with his intellect. But a person's entry aboard a ship is certainly dependent upon his decision, which is an agent of Divine providence. Even if Maimonides thought it was necessary for him to board the ship in order to escape persecution, he may not have thought the same about his brother's voyage that was undertaken for business purposes.

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<sup>7</sup> See the remarks of R. Y. Shilat who notes that this date fell out on this day of the week in the year 4931=1171/72.

<sup>8</sup> 1161.

But what is the meaning of marking those days by way of vows as fast days or as days of feasting and celebration? How can this be integrated into Maimonides's fundamental understanding that providence operates through the regularity of nature and the human intellect?

At the beginning of the Laws of Fasting, Maimonides writes that there is a Torah commandment to fast over a misfortune that befalls the community, and in the continuation he notes that the individual must also fast over his personal misfortunes. He explains this *mitzva* as follows:

[2] This is one of the paths to repentance. When misfortune arrives and people cry out in prayer and sound the trumpets, **they will all know that evil befell them because of their evil actions**, as it is written: "Your iniquities have turned away..." (Jeremiah 5:25). This will cause them to remove the calamity from upon themselves.

[3] However, if they do not cry out and do not sound the trumpets, but rather they say: **"This is just a natural occurrence, the problem is mere happenstance," this is cruelty which causes them to cling to their evil ways** and will bring about more misfortune. This is what the Torah means when it says: "If you remain indifferent (*be-keri*) to me, then I will be indifferent to you in fury (*chamat ker*)" (*Vayikra* 26:27-28). In other words, when I bring misfortune upon you so that you should repent, if you say that it is mere chance (*keri*), I will add to it the fury of that chance.

A fast must cause a person to change his ways and improve his character traits. Indeed, Maimonides did not suffice with fasting, which even by itself has value with respect to the improvement of morals, but he also committed himself to give charity and designated the day for seclusion that includes prayer and study.<sup>9</sup> In that way, Maimonides turned the fast into a vehicle for repentance and self-improvement. The question remains, however, what is the meaning of the argument that one should not relate to such misfortunes as accidents. Surely, according to the *Guide*, evils of the first type are due to chance that by necessity governs the material world!

Maimonides asserts that attributing chance to the world leads a person to cruelty, that is, to hardening of the heart, and this is certainly an evil trait. But the question remains whether, according to Maimonides, there is no truth to the argument that the misfortune befell the person by chance.

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<sup>9</sup> On the meaning of such seclusion, see *Guide* 3:21.

It may be suggested that a person always determines his actions; nothing is by chance, but they depend upon his level. Maimonides's fundamental insistence on allowing room, not only for Divine wisdom, but also for Divine will in His relationship to the world, must, however, leave a person in constant doubt as to the cause of a specific event. It is true that in the great majority of cases, what happens to a person results from his material nature, but perhaps this one time he merited that God should relate to Him by way of **His will**, and not only His wisdom. This uncertainty must lead a person to exhaust this possibility and embark upon the path of repentance.