Miracles in Rambam's Thought—a Function of Prophecy

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Introduction

The Torah ends with the following statement:

> ולא קם נביא עוֹד בישראל כמשה אשר ידעוֹ ה' פנים אל פנים לכל האוֹתוֹת והמוֹפתים אשר שלחוֹ ה' לעשוֹת בארץ מצרים לפרעה ולכל עבדיו ולכל ארצוֹ ולכל היד החזקה ולכל המוֹרא הגדוֹל אשר עשה משה לעיני כל ישראל. (דברים לד:י–יב)

> Never again did there arise in Israel a prophet like Moses—whom the Lord singled out, face to face, for the various signs and portents that the Lord sent him to display in the land of Egypt, against Pharaoh and all his courtiers and his whole country, and for all the great might and awesome power that Moses displayed before all Israel.[1]

Rambam comments on these verses:

> For here it establishes a connection and a tie between the two notions, namely, that there will not arise either someone who will have an apprehension similar to his or one who will perform actions similar to his. (*Moreh* 2:35)[2]

Rambam sees a connection and a parallel between Moshe's apprehension of God and his performance of miracles. Moshe's ability to perform the necessary miracles was dependent on the same understanding of God that was required for giving the Torah.[3] It is our goal in this article to try and understand how these two attributes of Moshe, prophecy and miraculous deeds, are linked and hopefully get a picture of Rambam's understanding of Moshe's miracles and miracles in the Torah in general.

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Miracles as Proof for Creation

At the end of lengthy discussions on the three opinions about Creation put forth by Aristotle, Plato and the Torah, Rambam states as follows:

> Know that with a belief in the creation of the world in time, all the miracles become possible and the law becomes possible, and all questions that may be asked on this subject, vanish. Thus it might be said: Why did God give prophetic revelation to this one and not to that?[4] Why did God give this law to this particular nation, and why did He not legislate to the other? Why did He legislate at this particular time, and why did He not legislate before it or after? Why did He impose these commandments and these prohibitions? **Why did He privilege the prophet with the miracles mentioned in relation to him and not with some others?** What was God's aim in giving this law? Why did He not, if such was His purpose, put the accomplishment of the commandments and the nontransgression of the prohibitions into our nature? The answer to all these questions would be: He wanted it this way; or His wisdom required it this way. And just as He brought the world into existence having the form it has, when He wanted to, without us knowing His will with regard to this or in what wisdom there was in His particularizing the forms of the world and the time of its creation- in the same way we do

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1 English citations of Tanakh are from the *JPS Hebrew English Tanakh*, Philadelphia: JPS, 1999.

2 English citations of the *Moreh Nevukhim* ("*Moreh*") are from the Shlomo Pines translation, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, Chicago: University of Chicago, 1963 with some changes for clarity.

3 See my "Negative Attributes and Direct Prophecy" in *Ḥakirah,* vol. 1, Fall 2004, for a detailed discussion of prophecy as it relates to Moshe Rabbeinu and to other prophets.

4 The formulation of this question is quite surprising and interesting in view of Rambam's opinion about prophesy that a well prepared person should automatically prophesize unless God specifically withholds prophecy from him. See *Moreh* 2:32. It should have been formulated as "why did God bar one properly prepared person from prophesizing while allowing another?"

> not know His will or the exigency of His wisdom that caused all the matters, about which questions have been posed above, to be particularized. (*Moreh* 2:25, p. 329)

The views that accommodate the Tradition[5] are either the Torah or Plato's opinion. Both allow for a Divine will while Aristotle does not. Medieval[6] Aristotelian understanding of the universe was that it existed forever concomitantly with God. Being that both existed eternally in their present form, God had no choice in creating and is, so to say, the "spirit"[7] or the idea and concept underlying the universe. According to this opinion nothing ever changed. The universe has been operating eternally just as it is now. There was never a point in time where God decided, willed or did anything to bring anything about or change anything.

> ...the belief in eternity the way Aristotle sees it - that is, the belief according to which the world exists in virtue of necessity, that no nature changes at all, and that the customary course of events cannot be modified with regard to anything - destroys the Law in its principle, necessarily gives lie to every miracle, and reduces to inanity all the hopes that the Law has held out unless – by God – one interprets the miracles figuratively also, as was done by the Islamic Internalists; this, however, would result in some sort of crazy imaginings... (*Moreh* 2:25, p. 328)

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5 The word 'Tradition' as used here is representative of those who believe in miracles and reward and punishment as defined later in this article.

6 Most Greek philosophical works were not available in their original language to Rambam and his contemporaries. They knew them as Arabic translations from the Greek. These translations were also interpretations. See Pines in his introduction to *The Guide*.

7 Actually, the word is, 'form.' I am simplifying for clarity. Medieval philosophy saw everything as a kind of dualism. Everything was composed of form and matter. Form is the underlying concept of the particular object that is composed of matter and Form. God, or the First Cause, is the Form that underlies all existence as the First Form. See *Moreh* 1:69, pp. 168 - 169 at to how Rambam distinguishes this understanding from anthropomorphism. Also see *Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot Yesodei ha-Torah* 4:7.

On the other hand, Plato, according to medieval understanding, held that although God and the universe are both eternal, what we now know as the universe was for the longest time nothing more than formless matter.[8] At a point in time God decided to transform this matter into the universe. This opinion attributes to God the power of choice and will and is therefore compatible with our Tradition.

> If however one believed in eternity according to the second opinion we have explained - which is the opinion of Plato - according to which the heavens too are subject to generation and corruption,[9] this opinion would not destroy the foundations of the Law and would be followed not by the lie being given to miracles, but by them becoming admissible. (*Moreh* 2:25, p. 328)

The position which is "the opinion of all who believe in the Law of Moshe our Master" that God created the world from nothing also allows for God having will and choice. It is the preferred opinion that is most compatible with the reading of the texts of the Torah, requiring the least amount of interpretation. As there is no way of proving Plato's opinion to be more consistent with our observable reality, the opinion that God created the world from nothingness is the one we, as religious Jews, accept.

> In view of the fact that it has not been demonstrated, (Plato's opinion), we shall not favor this opinion, nor shall we at all heed that other opinion (Aristotle's) but rather shall take the texts according to their external sense and shall say: The Law has given us knowledge of a matter the grasp of which is not within our power, and the mira-

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8 See *Moreh* 2:13, p. 283, "Hence they believe that there exists a certain matter that is eternal as the deity is eternal."

9 According to Aristotle the heavens are not subject to generation and corruption as they are not composed of matter. They are eternal. According to Plato the heavens also derive from original matter and are therefore subject to generation and corruption since they have the possibility of returning to that state.

> cle(s)[10] attests to the correctness of our claim.[11] (*Moreh* 2:25)

Divine Will, Miracles and Creation— an Inseparable Trio

Thus Rambam posits belief in the Law and in miracles as proof that God has will and choice. What is interesting about this approach is that rather than arguing that if God has no will His abilities are limited, Rambam uses an argument based on our belief system of miracles and the giving of the Law. It is proving one belief with another which, at first blush, is not a very strong argument for objective truth. On the other hand, coming from the opposite point of view, attributing will to God is also difficult. Will implies change. At some point in time there is a new decision based on the will to do something—

> ... but does not the supposition that one wishes at one time and does not wish at another time imply in itself change? (Moreh 2:18, p. 301)

and change is not an acceptable attribute of God. The discussion on the latter question is complex but the ultimate answer is that

> ... it is only by equivocation that our will and that of a being separate from matter are both designated as "will", for there is no likeness between the two wills (*ibid.* and see *Moreh* 2:21 for further discussion on the subject.)

Will is an attribute and, just like all attributes of God, it is only a vehicle to describe something about God that we have no words for, as He is beyond our experience. In other words, we ascribe to God certain qualities that we assume He has, based on the

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10 The plural is as per R. Kafaḥ's edition. It can also be read as a category of events classified as miracle, והנס, as in the Schwartz edition.

11 For an important insight on this approach of Rambam see Isaac Franck's article "Maimonides' Philosophy" in *Today in Judaism: A Quarterly Journal of Jewish Life and Thought*, vol. 4, spring 1955, pp. 99-109, which was also reprinted in *A Philosopher's Harvest,* Georgetown University Press.

universe we live in and because we, as humans, would have to have that quality to accomplish something similar. For example, to write we need fingers and we therefore attribute to God אצבע, finger, when we talk about the writing on the Tablets. We do not mean literally that He has a finger. Similarly, will is only a quality that we attribute to Him based on our assessment of what it might take to create the world at a point in time. Aristotle argued that if we allow for God to have willed the world into existence we also allow for God to have changed His mind at some point in time, which is against the concept of God being eternal.

> He (Aristotle) asserts - though he does not do so textually, but this is what his opinion comes to - that in his opinion it would be an impossibility that will should change in God or a new volition arise in Him ...it is impossible that a volition should undergo a change in Him or a new will arise in Him. (*Moreh* 2:13, p. 284)

Rambam addresses the issue by pointing out that Aristotle's argument is based on our human concept of will which we are attributing to God based on our experience. God's will, however, is different and cannot be compared to the human kind. It is a completely different "mechanism" that results in Creation in time without change in His essence[12]. Rambam says that our perception of miracles and the giving of the law force us to accept that God has will as he defines it and not as it is defined by Aristotle. Since the Torah reports the incidence of miracles, which necessitate divine will at some point in time as does the Law with its reward and punishment system,[13] it

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12 Rambam accepts that saying that something is impossible for God to do does not imply a lack of ability. See *Moreh* 3:15 and Yitzhak Grossman "On Divine Omnipotence and its Limitations" *Ḥakirah,* vol. 2, Fall 2005. That being the case, Aristotle's position that as 'will' connotes change it is impossible for God to have 'will,' does not make Him less omnipotent. Rambam, however, argues that will, as applied to God, is only a human description based on our observation. Therefore the normal definition of 'will' does not apply to God. God can will something without experiencing change.

13 Within the context of this article we confine ourselves to understanding miracles and we do not deal with the issue of reward and punishment.

therefore follows that Tradition does not accept Aristotle's view of God's will. Once we have accepted the uniqueness of God's will, we can accept Creation *ex nihilo* which is dependent on that same will. Creation, like Miracles and Reward and Punishment, can only be understood as a consequence of what we call God's will, which in reality is unchanged and unchanging from eternity.[14] What we have here is a kind of dualism. From man's point of view, there was a time when God willed Creation, as He willed Miracles and Reward and Punishment, while from God's position nothing changed.[15]

Rambam, in his discussion of Creation, has made it clear that there is no empirical proof, nor can there be, for Creation *ex nihilo,* just as there is no empirical proof that it was not so. Had there been empirical proof that the world is eternal, Rambam claims that

> … the texts indicating that the world has been produced in time are not more numerous than those indicating that the deity is a body. Nor are the gates of figurative interpretation shut in our faces or impossible of access to us regarding the subject of the creation of the world in time. For we could interpret them as figurative, as we have done when denying corporeality. Perhaps this would even be much easier to do; we should be very well able to give figurative interpretations of those texts and to affirm as true the eternity of the world. (*Moreh* 2:25)

However, even if the world was eternal[16], ontologically, as a result of our theological position regarding miracles and reward and punishment, we have to believe that God has will, unlike Aristotle who denied it. We can overcome Aristotle's argument by understanding the uniqueness of God's will. That being the case, and not having

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Rambam addresses this in *Moreh* 3:10 - 25 where he discusses Providence.

14 The idea that the attributes that we assign to God are unique to Him, and that they transcend human experience, is a common theme in Rambam's thought and consistent with his Negative Knowledge method of understanding God. This applies to Knowledge (*Moreh* 3:20), Actions (e.g., *Moreh* 1:65) and to all other attributes that have any relationship to physical acts or experiences.

15 I will expand on this difficult concept later in this paper.

16 For example, accepting Plato's opinion.

any empirical proof for Plato's opinion, we prefer the Torah description of Creation which, in its plain reading, supports Creation *ex nihilo*. Thus miracles and reward and punishment are not empirical but rather ontological proofs for Creation.

When are Miracles Created?

Having linked our understanding of Creation and miracles as they relate to God's will, Rambam ties the two ideas together further in his *Perush ha-Mishnah*[17] on *Avot* 5:5 where he explains the Mishnah עשרה דברים נבראו בין השמשות as follows:

> כבר הזכרתי לך בפרק השמיני שאינם סוברים שיש חידוש רצון בכל עת ועת אלא שבתחילת עשיית הדברים ניתן בטבעם שייעשה בהם כל מה שנעשה בין שהיה אותו הדבר נעשה ברוב הזמנים והוא הדבר הטבעי או שהיה באקראי והוא המופת ולפיכך אמר כי ביום הששי ניתן בארץ שתשקע בקרח ועדתו ובבאר שתוציא את המים ובאתון שתדבר... ושמא תאמר אם כל המופתים ניתנו בטבע אותן הדברים מששת ימי בראשית מדוע ייחדו אלו העשרה? דע שלא יחדום לענין שאין שם מופת שניתן בטבע הדברים מששת ימי בראשית זולת אלו, אלא אמר שאלו היתה עשייתם בין השמשות בלבד, ושאר המופתים ניתנו בטבע הדבר שנעשו בו בעת עשייתו בתחילה, והנני אומר לך משל, ביום שני בעת הבדלת המים ניתן בטבעם שיבקע ים סוף למשה, והירדן ליהושוע וכן לאליהו ואלישע. וביום הרביעי בעת שנבראת השמש ניתן בה שתעמוד בזמן פלוני כדבר יהושע אליה וכך שאר המופתים אלא שאלו העשרה ניתנו בטבע אותם הדברים בין השמשות.
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> As I mentioned in the eighth chapter,[18] the sages do not believe that there is periodic change of the Divine will. Rather at the beginning of the fashioning of the phenomena, He instituted into nature that through them there would be fashioned all that would be fashioned. Whether the phenomena which would be fashioned would be frequent, namely, a natural phenomenon, or would be an in-

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17 R. Kafaḥ's edition of משנה עם פירוש הרמב"ם הוצאת מוסד הרב קוק תשכ"ח.

18 See below.

> frequent change, namely a sign, they are all equal. Therefore they said that (at twilight) on the sixth day He instituted into the nature of the earth that Korach and his company would sink (into it), and concerning the well, that it would bring water forth, and concerning the donkey, that it would speak and similarly for the rest...[19] Should you ask if all miraculous events are in reality natural phenomena, why were these ten particularized? Know that they were not particularized to teach us that they were the only miracles that were in reality natural phenomena. The Mishnah is merely teaching us that only these were created at dusk while the other miracles were instilled into nature at the time of their original creation. For example, on the second day, when the waters were separated, they had it in their nature so that the Sea of Suf should split for Moshe, the *Yarden* for Yehoshua and so for Eliyahu and Elisha, and on the fourth day, when the sun was created, it had in its nature that it should stop at a certain time when Yehoshua spoke to it[20] and the same applies for all the other miracles. These ten received this natural ability at dusk.

Having established that God's will is unique, what is there to stop us from seeing miracles as a consequence of God's periodic will? Why can we not explain that when there was a need for the Jewish people to be saved from the Egyptians, God willed the sea to split? Rambam will not accept this way of thinking and dissuades us from this notion. All "miracles" are really natural phenomena that are perceived as miraculous when they occur infrequently. They were put into nature as a consequence of the Divine will at Creation, that same will that encompasses no change. To better understand the meaning of the six days of Creation, the establishment of miraculous phenom-

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19 For the *Perush ha-Mishnah,* wherever possible, I use the translation by Isadore Twersky, *A Maimonides Reader,* West Orange: Behrman House, 1972.

20 See *Moreh* 2:35 at the end for a different explanation of this event. It would seem that at the time Rambam wrote the *Perush ha-Mishnah* (in his twenties) he had not yet developed the explanation he gave in the *Moreh*, which he wrote in his sixties. As we will see, Rambam considered it a virtue to minimize miraculous explanations of irregular events.

ena during those days and how these relate to Divine will, we turn to Rambam's explanation of the Torah's presentation of Creation.[21]

> Afterwards, through His will and His volition[22], He brought into existence out of nothing all the beings as they are, time itself being one of the created things. For time is consequent upon motion... what is moved, that is, that upon the motion of which time is consequent - is itself created in time and came to be after not having been. Accordingly one's saying: God "was" before He created the world - where the word "was" is indicative of time - and similarly all the thoughts that are carried along in the mind regarding the infinite duration of His existence before the creation of the world, are all of them due to a supposition regarding time and not due to the true reality of time. (*Moreh* 2:13)

When we say God is eternal, which has a connotation of time, it is like everything else we say about God, just a way of expressing ourselves based on our perspective and point of reference. Before the physical world was created, before the motion of bodies could bring about in our minds the idea of time, there could not have been a notion of time. The Divine will to create, extant before Creation, is not time dependent, therefore, unchanging. In *Moreh* 2:30 (pp. 349-350) where Rambam interprets the first few chapters of *Bereshit*, he elaborates further:

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21 When interpreting Rambam's view of Creation, one has the choice of either being faithful to Rambam's Aristotelian understanding with all its technical details, or interpreting it, wherever possible, by introducing contemporary concepts. Without getting too technical, which is beyond my expertise, I have chosen the latter approach. I believe that I am following Rambam's teachings which I understand as being a guide rather than a closed treatise. Hence, its name, *Moreh Nevukhim*.

22 These two concepts, 'will' and 'volition,' are translations of the Arabic אראדה and משיה , which in turn are translated into Hebrew as רצון וחפץ. For an interesting discussion on the meaning of these two words and an analysis of where each one is used in the *Moreh*, see Prof. Avraham Nuriel in גלוי וסמוי בפילספיה היהודית בימי הביניים, Magnes Press, p. 41.

> I have already made it known to you that the foundation of the whole law is the view that God has brought the world into being out of nothing *without there having been a temporal beginning*. For time is created being consequent upon the motion of the sphere which is created.
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> Among the things you ought to know is the fact that the sages have explicitly stated in a number of passages that the word את figuring in his words את השמים ואת הארץ has in that verse the meaning: with. They mean by this that He created together with the heavens all that is in heaven and together with the earth all that is in the earth... Accordingly everything was created simultaneously; then gradually all things became differentiated.

Physical existence itself does not have a temporal beginning because time itself is a part thereof and cannot precede it. The word *Bereshit* used at Creation does not connote a notion of time but rather a hierarchical listing of the components of existence according to their importance. The "heart" of existence, *Bereshit*, is its concept and plan to the minutest detail: the heaven and the earth. It would seem that Rambam understands the first days of creation not as describing temporal events but rather as a hierarchical and sequential description of the causes and effects that make up the physical universe.[23] We would therefore translate the first verse - the principle[24] underlying the creation of heaven and earth from nothing is the system of causes and effects described in the following verses. The differentiation or the actual coming into existence is a subsequent, possibly ongoing, process.

> They have compared this to what happens when an agricultural laborer sows various kinds of grain in the soil at the same moment. Some of them sprout within a day, oth-

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23 R. Moshe Narboni understands Rambam this way as do Abarbanel, Shem Tov, and Ralbag. See Klein – Braslavy, p. 246.

24 Pines translates, "origin." The idea is that rather then seeing nature as a series of unrelated events possibly brought into existence independently by God, the universe exists as a result of a sequential cause and effect system where everything is interrelated, self-generated and self-regulating.

> ers within two days, and others again within three days, though everything was sowed at the same hour.[25]

The Divine will, which has within itself these laws that brought about physical existence, is described as sowing.[26] The image that comes to mind when using the term "sowing" is the placement of a seed in the ground. Once the seed is placed, the plant grows on its own. By sowing, man causes plants to grow just as the Divine will is the cause of Creation. The subsequent six days reflect the sequence of cause and effect that bring about the development, in *actu,* of that original Divine will. As the laws of nature are activated, there is a sequence of events where one event causes another. When Rambam discusses the two descriptions found in the Torah regarding the creation of man and woman and their sojourn in the Garden of Eden, he reinforces this idea using a Midrash:

> Now all the Sages are unanimous in thinking that all this story occurred on Friday and that nothing was changed in any respect after the six days of the Beginning. For this reason, none of these things should be incongruous; for, as we have said, **up till then no permanently established nature had come about.** (*Moreh* 2:30)

By placing the story of Adam and Ḥavah in the first six days of Creation, the Rabbis are telling us that it is a description of the natural laws that govern man's essence. Man's nature was established

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25 For a detailed discussion of this quotation and the whole issue see *Perush ha-Rambam le-Sepur Bri'at ha-Olam* by Sarah Klein – Braslavy, Tel Aviv, 1992, pp. 229 - 259.

26 Abarbanel, Narboni and Shem Tov understand sowing as total creation. They explain Rambam as saying that the entire universe was created in an instant and that the days refer to causal relationships and not time. However, the words "gradually all things became differentiated" indicate that after the instantaneous creation there was still an evolutionary process. I prefer to see instantaneous creation as the simultaneous inception of all the laws of nature which then brought physical existence into actuality in an evolutionary process. We need to look at Rambam as a guide on how to read the Torah and make it conform to reality and not be rigidly bound by the philosophy of his day. See Sarah Klein - Braslavy (above) for different interpretations.

at Creation, when the laws of the universe were set, but was actualized only at the end of a series of causes and effects when man finally came into existence. Rambam verbalizes this idea with "up till then no permanently established nature had come about." In other words, the first six days do not describe the actualization of things but describe the process of how things will be actualized.[27] Rambam understands that the six days of creation reflect the sequence of cause and effect that end up in the actualization of our current universe. To illustrate cause and effect, let us take water which is composed of oxygen and hydrogen. Combining the two gases will produce water making them the cause of water, and water the effect of the combination of the two. Following this thread back to molecular and atomic levels, and forward to the global a sequence of cause and effect becomes apparent. The six days of Creation are the laws that establish the sequence of what is cause and what is effect. If viewed in a linear fashion, the creation of man on the sixth day indicates that he is among the last things in the line of cause and effect. The ten things created at dusk on the sixth day would indicate that they are even further down in that sequence. The fact that a longer chain of cause and effect must be in place in order for these events to occur may possibly explain why they are less frequent[28] in actuality.[29] This is reinforced by the fact that all ten events or artifacts listed are unique.[30] By placing

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27 The word ברא in its different forms refers to quite a wide range of meanings. It could refer to the creation of a physical entity but it could also refer to concepts in a person's mind as used in 1:46, for example, as to prophecy. See Sarah - Klein Braslavy, pp. 87 - 88. Her argument, though, is not convincing in that particular case.

28 As we will see, degree of frequency is what defines an event as natural or miraculous.

29 It is important to note that Rambam in the above citation says that the laborer sows "various kinds of grain." The implication is that the chain of cause and effect is not unique and that more than one parallel chain exists. Using medieval physics, he refers to the four elements which when combined in different sequence, ratio, and so on, produce different effects.

30 The only exception is the קשת, which, in any case, is difficult to understand as it is a frequent occurrence and thus hardly perceived as a miracle. There are many explanations of הכתב והמכתב. Rambam chooses Torah and Tablets as opposed to Meiri who understands that they refer to the alphabet and writing tools. See his *Perush* on this Mishnah. I

miracles during the six days of creation, the Mishnah thus tells us, according to Rambam, that they are the natural result of cause and effect put into place at Creation. They are part of the fabric of the universe.

How do Miracles Happen?

Having established that the phenomena that we perceive as miracles are really natural events that occur infrequently, Rambam now addresses the issue of what are the conditions necessary to trigger those events. Are miracles the result of a new Divine will that is a response to a specific need or are they a consequence of the original will? In his introduction to *Avot* eighth chapter, Rambam discusses man's free will, explaining that when the Scriptures and the Rabbis say that all man's movements are dependent on God's will and wish, it means that when God created man he put into his nature the ability to act with freedom of choice. He states:

> ועל זה חולקים המדברים ,כי שמעתים אומרים: "החפץ בכל דבר, עת אחר עת תמיד".ולא כך נאמין אנחנו; כי אם החפץ היה בששת ימי בראשית, והדברים כולם נוהגים לפי טבעיהם תמיד כמו שאמר מה שהיה הוא שיהיה, ומה שנעשה הוא שיעשה ,ואין כל חדש תחת השמש (קוהלת א', ט') ולפיכך הוצרכו החכמים לומר, כי כל המופתים היוצאים מן הרגיל, שהיו ושיהיו על פי הייעוד, כולם קדם להם החפץ בששת ימי בראשית. והושם בטבע הדברים מאותה שעה ואילך, שיתרחש בהם מה שיתרחש .וכשהתרחש בזמן שהיה צריך**, חשבוהו לדבר שנתחדש עתה**
> ,ואינו כך. וכבר הרחיבו הדברים בעניין הזה במדרש קהלת וזולתו. ועוד להם מאמר בעניין הזה: "עולם כמנהגו נוהג "ותמצאם תמיד, בכל דבריהם, עליהם השלום, שנמנעים מתת הרצון בדבר אחר דבר, ובעת אחר עת .[31]

the alphabet and writing tools. See his *Perush* on this Mishnah. I believe Rambam chose his explanation on purpose with the idea of uniqueness in mind.

31 See chapter 8 of the introduction to *Avot, Shemona Perakim,* p. 262, in R. Kafaḥ's edition of *Perush ha-Mishnah*. I copied from www.daat.ac.il which uses the Tibon translation.

> To paraphrase, "As I understand the Mutakillimun[32] they disagree on this point and say that the will is constantly needed in everything at all times. That is not our belief. For we believe that the will was present during the six days of Creation, and that all things always behave according to their nature as it says "Only that shall happen which has happened only that shall occur which has occurred; there is nothing new under the sun" (*Kohelet* 1:9.) Therefore the Rabbis found it necessary to say that all the miracles that already happened, that will happen in the future as promised, and that are irregular, all were willed during the first six days of creation. Those things had in their original nature the novel behavior that occurred later, at a set time, and when that happened at a fortuitous time, **people perceived them as if they were willed now**. That is not so. Our Rabbis expanded on this in *Midrash Kohelet* and in other places. They also stated "the world acts according to its custom."[33]

Basing himself on *Kohelet*, Rambam states unequivocally that the Divine will is not temporal and changing. In fact there is only one will, the same will before, during and after Creation, and all that happens is a result of that same original will. Explaining what forced him to take this position, Rambam in *Moreh* 2:28 (p. 335) in a discussion about whether the universe will remain forever never to be destroyed, and asserting that Shlomo ha-Melekh believed so, quotes the verse in *Kohelet* 3:14, "That whatsoever God doeth, it shall be forever; nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it and God has so made it that they should fear Him". He explains it as follows:

> Thus he imparts in this verse the information that the world is the work of the deity and that it is eternal *a parte post*.[34] He also states the cause of its being eternal *a parte post*; namely, in his words: nothing can be added to it, nor

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32 The Mutakillimun are followers of the Kalam, a Muslim philosophical school. See Pines' introduction to the *Guide,* p. cxxiv.

33 *Avodah Zarah* 54b.

34 The reference is to eternity which is to come as opposed to eternity that is past.

> anything taken from it. For this is the cause of its being forever.[35] It is as if he said that the thing that is changed, is changed because of a deficiency in it that should be made good or because some excess that is not needed and should be got rid of. Now the works of the deity are perfect, and with regard to them there is no possibility of an excess or a deficiency. Accordingly they are of necessity permanently established as they are, for there is no possibility of something calling for a change in them. He has also, as it were, stated an end for what has come to exist or given an excuse for what changes, saying in the final part of the verse: and God hath so made it, that they should fear before Him - he refers to the production in time of miracles. In saying after that That which hath been is now, and that which is to be hath already been; and God seeketh that which is pursued, the author states that He desires that that which exists should continue and that its various parts should be consecutive to one another.

Although the Divine will manifested itself through physical existence at Creation, it does not do so continuously. Any change in God's creation would imply imperfection and that cannot be accepted. An omnipotent God has created a perfect universe that needs no adjustments even when man, who has free will, has caused what seem to us humans, like unforeseen events. This ability to foresee and provide for all eventualities is one of God's attributes, omniscience, what we call ידיעה. That being the case, what is considered an unnatural event is not only, per se, part of the fabric of the universe, but the timing of when it will be manifested is already preset and predicted. It is man looking at the rare event who perceives it as miraculous, especially when the occurrence is fortuitous or seems that way. This idea, that man sees the irregular and fortuitous event as a direct involvement of God in the running of the universe, is verbalized "and God hath so made it, that they should fear before Him - he refers to the production in time of miracles." Regular day-

35 Kenneth Seeskin in *Maimonides on the Origin of the World*, Cambridge Univ. Press, points out that once Rambam proves Creation *ex nihilo*, the universe should then be subject to corruption and have a term. The point of this chapter is to argue that as Creation results from God's will, which is perfect, one cannot say Creation has to be corruptible as this would imply imperfection.

production in time of miracles." Regular day-to-day predictable nature, contrasted with the unusual, unexpected, and irregular, makes man aware of God. As Rambam explains in *Hilkhot Yesodei ha-Torah* 4:12:

> When a man reflects on these things, studies all these created beings, from the angels and spheres down to human beings and so on, and realizes the Divine Wisdom manifested in them all, his love for God will increase, his soul will thirst, his very flesh will yearn to love God. He will become filled with fear and trembling ....

When studying all the created things, understanding how they function, learning how to predict sequences of cause and effect and thereby seeing the great wisdom that is in nature, man is filled with awe. The contrast between repetitive and predictable nature and the infrequent event focuses man's attention and thoughts on God and His great wisdom.

In *Moreh* 2:29 (p. 345) Rambam further reinforces this idea that all "unnatural" events are not only part of nature, but were also programmed at the time of Creation to occur at a set time. Referring to *Bereshit Rabbah* 5:5[36] אמר ר' יוֹנתן תנאין התנה הקב"ה עם הים שיקרע לפני ישראל ה"ה וישב הים לפנוֹת בוֹקר לאיתנוֹ - לתנאוֹ. אמר ר' ירמי'ה בן אלעזר לא עם הים בלבד התנה הקב"ה אלא עם כל מה שנברא בששת ימי בראשית.[37]

> This notion consists in their holding the view that miracles too are something that is, in a certain respect, in nature.... He put it into these natures that all the miracles that oc-

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36 Rambam refers here to both *Midrash Kohelet* and *Bereshit Rabbah* which is probably the same Midrash he referred to in our earlier quote from the *Eight Chapters*. See R. Kafaḥ's note 9 here.

37 The Midrash then enumerates these events: the parting of the sea; the heavens listening to Moshe when he said האזינו; the sun and moon stopping for Yehoshua; the ravens feeding Eliyahu; the fire not harming Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah; the lions not harming Daniel; the heavens opening for Ezekiel and the fish spitting out Jonah. At the end the Midrash refers to the verse in *Kohelet* – "and God has so made it that they should fear before Him," the same verse that Rambam referred us to as explained and quoted earlier.

> curred would be produced in them **at the time when they occurred**. According to this opinion the sign of a prophet consists in God's making known to him the time when he must make his proclamation, and then a certain thing is effected according to what was put into its nature when first it received its particular impress.[38]

Here we see the convergence of the concept of miracles and the idea of prophecy. According to Rambam, prophecy is attained when man, after perfecting himself to the point that he is able to correctly speculate about the universe and its First Cause, understands its workings and thus can predict the future.[39] The prophet can go one step further and take advantage of that knowledge. He can use it for practical purposes as some have done. Moshe did so in the instances listed in the Mishna Avos 5:5, while Yehoshua, Eliyohu and Elisha did the same with the waters of the *Yarden*.

The Different Categories of Miracles

The type of event a prophet can predict, just like prophecy itself, depends on the level of his apprehension of God and his understanding of how God runs the world. At the most basic level, a prophet proves his authenticity by predicting an event. It does not have to be something very rare. Just predicting correctly a natural event such as

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38 Reading Rambam's introduction to this comment "The Sages have made a very strange statement about miracles…" would seem to indicate that he disagrees with this *Ḥazal* and that he brings it only to show that his exposition is not as radical as the one suggested by the Rabbis. However, after careful consideration, this is not an argument Rambam normally uses. If the Rabbi's position is wrong why discuss it with such a positive spin? He comments, "...it indicates the superiority of the man...." Does he consider that opinion superior to his own? Obviously one has to read "a very strange statement about miracles" as a positive rather than a negative statement. 'Strange,' in this context, should be understood as 'surprising and admirable in its daring.' See also Prof Avraham Nuriel, p. 158, where he shows that the Arabic word translated here as 'strange' is used by Rambam when he agrees with an opinion.

39 For a detailed discussion of this topic see my article in *Ḥakirah,* vol. 1, "Negative Attributes and Direct Prophecy."

rain at a specific time is enough. In doing so, he demonstrates that his speculation in metaphysics has been successful and on the right path.[40] In *Hilkhot Yesodei ha-Torah* 10:1 Rambam rules:

> **א** כל נביא שיעמוד לנו ויאמר שה' שלחו, אינו צריך לעשות אות כאחד מאותות משה רבנו או כאותות אלייהו ואלישע, שיש בהן שינוי מנהגו של עולם; אלא האות שלו שיאמר דברים העתידין להיות בעולם, וייאמנו דבריו, שנאמר "וכי תאמר, בלבבך: איכה נדע את הדבר . . ." (דברים יח, כא)
>
> A prophet that claims that he was sent to us by God, is not required to perform a sign like one of Moshe's signs, Eliyahu's or Elisha's, that were unnatural. His (the prophet's) sign is to foretell future happenings and those things come to pass as the verse says...

Following his custom to categorize, Rambam in his אגרת תחיית המתים,[41] divides miracles into two general groups: things that happen all the time naturally and those that are unnatural or rare as defined in *Shemonah Perakim*.

Natural events are identified as miracles if one of the following conditions is met. a) If they happen at the exact time the prophet predicted they would happen. b) If they come with extreme intensity such as the locusts in Egypt. c) When something happens constantly without let up, such as a long period of national peace and prosperity or the reverse. (Note how the last one does not even require a prophet's involvement. The Torah itself plays the role of prophet when it predicts that Jews will be rewarded or punished according to their actions (see the letter, p. 370)).

The rare event is identified as miraculous if it is of short duration, reverting to its original state. Otherwise it will be seen as natural and unremarkable. The proof that the transformation of Moshe's staff into a snake was abnormal was its becoming a staff again; the miracle at the splitting of the sea was when it reverted to its original

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40 See the story of the four who entered the 'vineyard' in *Ḥagigah* 14b which describes the risks involved in metaphysical speculations and the limited success that can be expected. (Only 1 of 4 emerged unscathed).

41 אגרות הרמב"ם מאת יצחק שילת מעלה אדומים התשמ"ז דף שעא.

state. (For further discussion of this idea that miracles are of short duration see *Moreh* 2:29).

Having established that miracles are natural events that occur in nature, and are taken advantage of by prophets, we now turn to Rambam in *Moreh* 2:35 where he addresses what differentiates Moshe's miracles from those of other prophets:

> As for the difference between his miracles in general and those of every prophet in general, it should be said that all the miracles worked by the prophets or for them were made known to a few people only....The same holds good for all the signs of all the prophets except Moshe our Master. For that reason Scripture makes it clear, likewise by way of information with reference to him, that no prophet will ever arise who will work signs both before those who are favorably and those who are unfavorably disposed toward him as was done by Moshe. This is the meaning of the dictum: But no prophet again arose in Israel like Moshe whom G-d knew face to face, with all the signs and portents which G-d sent him to do in the land of Egypt to Pharaoh and to all his servants and to all his land, and with all the strong hand and all the great fear that Moshe did before the eyes of all Israel - For here it establishes a connection and a tie between the two notions, namely, that there will not arise either someone who will have an apprehension similar to his or one who will perform actions similar to his. Thereupon it makes it clear that these signs were worked in front of Pharaoh, all his servants, and all his land -who were unfavorably disposed to him - and also in the presence of all Israel - who followed him: in the sight of all Israel.

When comparing Moshe to other prophets, Rambam does not explain how their performance of miracles differs; he only compares the number of people witnessing the miracles. The other prophets performed miracles witnessed by only a portion of the Jewish nation while Moshe performed his in front of all Israel - לעיני כל ישראל. What is the significance of this observation and how does it reflect on Moshe's greatness?

In *Moreh* 2:38, Rambam explains the personal development that is required for a prophet who sees the future to act on his vision. Man is born with a certain amount of courage. Some are more coura-

geous than others. However, courage is a universal trait necessary for survival. "This faculty is similar to the faculty of repulsion[42] among the natural faculties." Divination, or what we would probably call instinct, exists in all people to varying degrees. Subconsciously we come to conclusions about people or events, without a step-by-step analysis, and many times, to our surprise, we find that we are correct.

> Thus you will find in your soul that so and so spoke or acted in such and such a manner in such and such an episode, and the thing is really so... You will find among people a man who's conjecturing and divination are very strong and habitually hit the mark, so that he hardly imagines that a thing comes to pass without its happening wholly or in part as he imagined it.

Rambam proceeds to explain that these two faculties need to be well developed for a prophet to be able to act on his intellectual insights.

> And when the intellect overflows toward them, these two faculties become very greatly strengthened so that this may finally reach the point you know: namely, the lone individual, having only his staff, went boldly to the great king in order to save a religious community from the burden of slavery, and had no fear or dread, because He said to him: I will be with thee.

It is not enough that one knows the future, one needs courage and certainty to act on that knowledge. The combination of the rational and imaginative faculties allows the prophet to foresee the future while courage and instinct give him the ability to act. When extolling the greatness of Moshe's miracles, Rambam notes the Torah's use of the key words לעיני כל ישראל - in front of **all** Israel and sees that as a key element. It would seem that the greater the stakes, the more difficult the ability to act. When faced with the decision to drown in the sea or surrender to the Egyptians, the decision of the prophet to rely on an unnatural event that he foresees requires a level of certainty that could only be reached at Moshe's level of prophecy.

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42 Repulsion serves to protect one from harmful things.

Rambam thus ends the subject comparing Moshe's miracles to other prophets as follows:

> After the prophecy and the miracles of Moshe have in accordance with my injunction, been set apart in your mind - seeing that the extraordinary character of his apprehension is similar to the extraordinary character of his actions - and after you have come to believe that his is a rank that we are incapable of grasping in its true reality ...

Conclusion

Following our understanding of Rambam we have defined miracles as properties present in nature that require certain convergences of cause and effect to occur. They are seen as miracles because of the way they occur either rarely or fortuitously. In reality they are preset and would occur with or without human (prophetic) intervention. It is up to the prophet to learn about them and use them where necessary. Depending on the circumstances and stakes involved, the level of certainty allows the prophet to act on his information. Moshe's level of prophecy afforded him the courage and certainty to act even when the stakes involved put the future of the nation at risk.[43] ☙

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43 This article together with "Negative Attributes and Direct Prophecy" is the result of my study of Rambam's Prophecy. I still have some notes on a study on *Ma'amad Har Sinai* which we did as a group several years ago and which was the start of this project. Many of the ideas that germinated then have become part of these two articles. The parts specific to the *Har Sinai* event, not yet put to paper, I plan to integrate into future articles. I hope to now turn my attention to Providence—*Hashgaḥah* in Rambam's thought.

I would like to thank the editor-in-chief of *Ḥakirah*, Rabbi Asher Benzion Buchman, for his patience and support over the years, listening to my ideas, debunking the ones that made no sense and helping refine the ones that had merit. Many of his ideas and thoughts are in these papers, consciously and subconsciously. For his work on Rambam's thought, see his books, *Encountering the Creator*, *Rambam and Redemption* and *Bedibur Echod*. I also want to thank, Sam Reiser, Henry Lam, Professors Sheldon Epstein and Yonah Wilamowsky, *ḥaverim* at our *Shabbat ḥaburot* who listen patiently to my "philosophical musings." Of special mention is Heshey Zelcer, a member of our *ḥaburah* and CEO of our

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