

## ***Divine Providence and Natural Forces: Conflict or Harmony?***

**By: MICAH SEGELMAN**

Tension appears to exist between the ideas of *hashgacha pratit, teva*, and *bechira*.<sup>1</sup> Do natural laws, and the choices made by others, impact people's lives in a causal sense? Alternatively, does divine providence lead to a pre-determined outcome irrespective of these forces? Perhaps nature and the actions of others are utilized only as a tool for carrying out the divine will in a way that obscures *HKBH's* intervention, but do not influence the ultimate outcome.

Denying the causal impact of natural forces seems to contradict the intuitive notion that one can understand and utilize natural forces in order to influence the ultimate outcome. On the other hand, limiting the scope of *hashgacha* appears incompatible with religious experience. How is one to thank *HKBH* for His "miracles that are with us every day" in *Modim* thrice daily? On what basis is someone who is faced with danger, or afflicted with adversity, to respond with *teshuva* and *tefillah*? How does one find meaning in suffering?

Contrary to approaches that minimize either *teva* or *hashgacha*, I will argue for an approach that acknowledges the important roles of both *teva* and *hashgacha*.

Since the very notion of *hashgacha* seems to presuppose the existence of miracles, I will begin by discussing miracles and distinguishing between miracles based on their "hiddenness"—the degree to which they are consistent with nature. I will demonstrate that, although different opinions may exist on some of the details, hidden miracles as a usual phenomenon and natural forces as causal are widely accepted ideas, and I will explain

---

<sup>1</sup> The author gratefully acknowledges the comments offered by Rabbi Yitzchak Adlerstein and Rabbi Ahron Lopiansky to earlier versions of this manuscript and expresses sincere thanks to Dr. Aharon Wolf for engaging in discussions and offering feedback throughout the process of writing this paper. The author also thanks R' David Guttman from the *Hakirah* editorial board and two anonymous reviewers for their comments. The author bears sole responsibility for the final product.

---

Rabbi Micah Segelman studied in Yeshiva Chofetz Chaim (Rochester and Queens) and is currently a PhD candidate in Health Services Research and Policy at the University of Rochester.

why they are not mutually exclusive. Because natural laws have causal impact, I will distinguish between outcomes that are caused by natural forces where *HKBH* could intervene but does not (*mikra*), and those caused by direct divine intervention. I will show that many sources reflect this distinction, and consider the differences between direct intervention and *mikra*.

### Three Types of Miracles

Ramban differentiates between open miracles, such as those that occurred during the exodus from Egypt, and hidden miracles. He says (*Bereishis* 17:1 and *Shemos* 6:2), for example, that different names of *HKBH* reflect these different types of miracles, and that open miracles are few and far between—they are not performed “in every generation and for each wicked person” (*Shemos* 13:16).

Furthermore, Ramban (*Vayikra* 26:11) maintains that not all hidden miracles are equivalent. He writes (*Vayikra* 26:11):

והטעם בזה כי הברכות אע"פ שהם נסים הם מן הנסים הנסתרים שכל התורה מלאה מהם כאשר פירשתי והם אפילו ליחיד העובד . . . וימלא ימיו בטובה. אבל אלו הברכות שבפרשה הזאת הן כלליות בעם והן בהיות כל עמנו כלם צדיקים . . . וכבר בארנו כי כל אלה הברכות כולם נסים אין בטבע שיבאו הגשמים ויהיה השלום לנו מן האויבים ויבא מורך בלבם לנוס מאה מפני חמשה בעשותינו החוקים והמצות ולא שיהיה הכל הפך מפני זרענו השנה השביעית. ואע"פ שהם נסים נסתרים שעולם כמנהגו נוהג עמהם אבל הם מתפרסמים מצד היותם תמיד לעולם בכל הארץ . . . יודע לכל כי מאת ה' היתה זאת . . .

All hidden miracles share the characteristic that the natural order is seemingly maintained. Yet some hidden miracles involve patterns that, when thoughtfully observed, can be seen to be indicative of divine intervention.<sup>2</sup> Discrete events, each one plausibly explainable as random, taken together become difficult to explain as chance occurrences. We can say that these miracles, though hidden, are “less hidden.” This is reminiscent of how scientists use statistical methods to draw conclusions from data. Scientists declare that a finding is statistically significant if it is unlikely to have been produced by chance alone. Ramban in *Shemos* (13:16)<sup>3</sup> refers to this idea as well.

<sup>2</sup> See *Michtav M'Ellyahu*, Volume 2, *Purim*, *Neis Nistar*, who draws a similar distinction.

<sup>3</sup> At the very end of the piece where he refers to hidden miracles becoming publicized.

Ramban (*Shemos* 23:25 and *Vayikra* 26:11) provides examples of the two types of hidden miracles. A totally hidden miracle would be if food is “blessed” to be of superior quality and this leads to good health. Ramban stresses that when a righteous person has a long, healthy life as a result of this miracle, nothing seems unusual—evil people can also lead long, healthy lives. In contrast, it is very improbable for one land and one nation to be constantly blessed with abundant rain, peace, plenty, and tranquility. It is equally improbable for the rains to completely cease when the *shemitta* year is violated.

There are thus three categories of miracles:

1. Miracles that are completely hidden (e.g., a righteous person is blessed with good health)
2. Miracles that are “less hidden”—they don’t openly violate nature but are more difficult to attribute to random chance (e.g., peace and plentiful rain in response to the righteousness of the Jewish people)
3. Miracles that openly violate nature (e.g., the splitting of the sea)

Ramban (*Vayikra* 26:11) places an important restriction on the “less hidden” miracles—they apply only when the entire nation is righteous (or wicked). The completely hidden miracles, however, apply even to individuals (see quote above where this is stated explicitly). Ramban goes on to say that when the entire nation is righteous, these “less hidden” miracles are at play to the extent that medical cures are not needed. Ramban points out that this situation is clearly not the norm<sup>4</sup>—the Torah itself presupposes that medical cures are needed as it requires a damager to pay doctor’s fees.

### **Completely Hidden Miracles**

Given the limited applicability of both open miracles and “less hidden” ones, it becomes extremely important to explore the parameters of the completely hidden miracles. *Hashgacha*, except in the unusual circumstances in which the other forms of miracles are at play, is realized through completely hidden miracles.

Rabbi Dr. David Berger<sup>5</sup> highlights several passages in Ramban’s writings to argue for limiting the scope of hidden miracles/*hashgacha pratit*. In one of these passages, Ramban (*Devarim* 11:13) limits miracles in two

---

<sup>4</sup> See also *Ta’az* YD 336:1.

<sup>5</sup> Berger, David. Miracles and the Natural Order in Nachmanides. <<http://zotorah.org/assets/media/MiraclesNahmanides.pdf>>, accessed Dec 3, 2013.

ways: they occur only based on the actions of the nation rather than those of the individual, and they occur for exceptional people (righteous or wicked) rather than for ordinary ones<sup>6</sup>. He writes:

ובאור הענין כי השם לא יעשה הנסים תמיד לתת מטר הארץ . . . רק על מעשה רוב העם אבל היחיד הוא בזכותו יחיה והוא בעונו ימות . . . ודע כי הנסים לא יעשו לטובה או לרעה רק לצדיקים גמורים או לרשעים גמורים אבל הבינונים כדרך מנהגו של עולם יעשה בהם טובה או רעה כדרכם וכעלילותם.

To what sort of miracles is Ramban referring? If all miracles are included, then Ramban indeed maintains a very limited view of *hashgacha*. This is Dr. Berger's reading (Berger p. 8): "The assertion that miracles are performed only for the absolutely righteous or wicked is couched in general terms and appears to include every variety of miracles. Hence, ordinary people are excluded from the regular operation of hidden miracles and are left, as in the *Commentary to Genesis*, to the customary, natural order."

However, it appears that this passage of Ramban in *Devarim* is not referring to all miracles and in fact does not apply to completely hidden miracles. According to Ramban in *Vayikra*, the limitation of hidden miracles to the nation rather than to the individual applies only to the "less hidden" miracles—not to the completely hidden miracles. **Ramban in *Vayikra* says explicitly that "less hidden" miracles apply only when the whole nation is righteous (or wicked) but that completely hidden miracles apply even to individuals.** Ramban in *Devarim* is consistent with Ramban in *Vayikra* only if one understands Ramban in *Devarim* to refer to "less hidden" miracles.<sup>7</sup> This point is reinforced by the examples of miracles that Ramban in *Devarim* uses for illustration: rain falling or being withheld. These are specifically the "less hidden" miracles to which Ramban refers in *Vayikra*.

Another indication of Ramban's intent is that he says that an individual "lives based on his merits and dies based on his sins" and that ordinary

<sup>6</sup> There is actually a disagreement whether Ramban requires that both criteria be met for miracles to occur or if he means that they can occur for exceptional people even though typically they don't occur for individuals. The latter reading is adopted by the *Mizrachi* and perforce by Dr. Berger as well. See the commentary on Ramban, *Devarim* 11:13 in Ramban, *Commentary on the Torah*, Volume 7, *Devarim* (NY: Mesorah, 2008), pp. 262–264.

<sup>7</sup> If one adopts the first reading of Ramban referred to in the prior footnote, Ramban in *Devarim* is adding a condition to what he wrote in *VaYikra*—that less hidden miracles occur only for exceptional people.

people are dealt with both within the natural order and also “in accordance with their actions.” This again seems to indicate that completely hidden miracles apply to ordinary people.

Additionally, there are the famous words of Ramban in *Shemos* (13:16). Ramban’s words, which emphasize hidden miracles while deemphasizing the natural order, strongly militate against limiting hidden miracles to the select few.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, Rabbenu Bechaya (Introduction to *Ki Sisa*) is more explicit. He paraphrases this Ramban in *Shemos* and adds the comment that “there is not a single Jew who does not unknowingly experience hidden miracles every day.”

Thus, I conclude that according to Ramban and Rabbenu Bechaya, hidden miracles are a usual and not a rare occurrence. Although their approach is not necessarily universal—Ramban’s position on miracles and *hashgacha*, which has been the subject of much discussion,<sup>9</sup> may differ—I will demonstrate in a later section of this essay entitled “Sources That Seem to Reject *Mikra*” that many other authorities agree. Nonetheless, I will now argue that this does not preclude accepting *teva* as causal.

### Natural Forces and *Hashgacha*

I have made an argument that Ramban does not limit completely hidden miracles to the select few and that they are a reality in the life of even the average Jew. Yet two other passages in Ramban’s writings seem to imply otherwise. Ramban (*Bereishis* 18:19 and Job 36:7) asserts that people who are distant from *HKBH*, **even if they do not inherently deserve to be**

---

<sup>8</sup> The words of the Netziv, though not specifically based on Ramban, leave the reader with a similar impression. The Netziv (*Haamek Davar Shemos* 17:7 and 17:14) stresses the centrality of the belief in *hashgacha pratis* taking place within the natural order, even asserting that the essential feature of *Amalek* is that they deny that there is any divine intervention in the natural order.

<sup>9</sup> Relevant sources include: David Guttman, “Miracles in Ramban’s Thought—A Function of Prophecy,” *Hakirah*, Vol. 3 and David Guttman, “Divine Providence—Goals, Hopes, and Fears; *Ki Kol Drachav Mishpat*,” *Hakirah*, Vol. 5; Langermann, Y. Tzvi, Maimonides and Miracles: The Growth of a (Dis)belief, *Jewish History*, Vol. 18, No. 2/3, Commemorating the Eight Hundredth Anniversary of Maimonides’ Death (2004), pp. 147–172, available at <[http://www.academia.edu/2483441/Maimonides\\_and\\_Miracles](http://www.academia.edu/2483441/Maimonides_and_Miracles)>; Rabbi Gil Student, <<http://hirhurim.blogspot.com/2010/04/rambam-on-miracles.html>>; Rabbi Natan Slifkin, <<http://www.rationalistjudaism.com/2010/06/mana-and-maimonides.html>>, who also cites a number of additional sources. Several other sources cited in the present paper are relevant as well. I return briefly to Ramban’s approach to *hashgacha* at the very end of this paper.

**punished for their sins, can be abandoned to *mikra*—to the vicissitudes of nature.** Ramban says this is in fact why the Torah insists that the Jewish people use natural means to prepare themselves for war. Ramban (Job 36:7) also approvingly cites Rambam in *Moreh Nevuchim* (3:18) who explains that the degree of *hashgacha* received by each individual varies based on their merits, and that people who are distant from HKBH are subject to *mikra* “like one who walks in the dark who will certainly stumble.” Being vulnerable to *mikra* seems to conflict with the assertion of *hashgacha pratit*.

Comments of Rabbenu Bechaya appear equally contradictory. Although Rabbenu Bechaya (Introduction to *Ki Sisa*) maintains that every Jew experiences hidden miracles, he also (*Bereishis* 18:19) endorses the comments of Ramban (*Bereishis* 18:19) that people who are not righteous can be abandoned to *mikra*.<sup>10</sup>

I believe that these apparent contradictions demonstrate that accepting the existence of hidden miracles, even frequent ones, does not imply a belief that people are immune from the forces of nature. I will now demonstrate that many thinkers, though they may differ on nuances, maintain that natural forces are causal. I suggest that Ramban and Rabbenu Bechaya accept this as well, and will now explain why there is in fact no contradiction between embracing hidden miracles as typical phenomena and believing that *teva* is causal.

The *Sefer Hachinuch* (*Mitzva* 546), in discussing the *mitzva* of *maakeb*, asserts that HKBH embedded natural forces into the world and that people, with the exception of the exceptionally righteous, are subject to these forces. The Ralbag (Samuel I 26:10) explains the *mitzva* of *maakeb* similarly. Similarly, Rambam in *Shemoneh Perakim* (*perak* 8) says that many *mitzvos* in the Torah are based on the premise that *teva* and *bechira* are causal and can truly have an impact on other people. He says this is why there is

---

<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, Rabbenu Bechaya’s (*Bereishis* 18:19) assertion that many people do not merit to be saved from *mikra* seems to conflict with his statement (Introduction to *Shelach* and *Bereishis* 6:15) that the reason that the Jewish people are commanded to use natural means to fight wars is because HKBH performs miracles only when natural means have been fully utilized. The Ralbag (I Kings 17:3) similarly says that HKBH minimizes miracles and works through natural means as much as possible. I would suggest that Rabbenu Bechaya is offering this approach to explain why the Jewish people must utilize natural means even when they in fact receive special protection. He is discussing sending spies, an action that seems unnecessary since the war to conquer Israel was based on the spiritual standing of the Jewish people and not on natural considerations. Rabbenu Bechaya could agree that in other situations, natural means are needed for warfare because we may not merit divine protection.

a mitzvah of *maakeh*, an exemption from war given to those who have begun certain activities without completing them, and limitations on the taking of collateral. Rambam in *Moreh Nevuchim* (3:12) furthermore attributes suffering to natural causes inherent in the physical world, to free willed choices of others, and to overly indulgent, unhealthy lifestyles. In his *Perush Hamishnayos* (*Pesachim* Chapter 4), Rambam compares medicine curing an illness to food “curing” hunger.

Rabbi Yehuda HaLevi in *Kuzari* (5:20) says that all phenomena can be traced to HKBH in one of two ways: directly or through intermediaries which include *teva*, *mikra*, and *bechira*. It is implied by the context—and specifically by his assertion that wicked people can be the incidental beneficiaries of beneficial *mikra*—that *teva*, *mikra*, and *bechira* can result in different outcomes than if all phenomena resulted from the direct influence of HKBH.

The Maharal in *Gevuros Hashem* (*Perek* 61) says that the world is usually managed indirectly through *teva*. One who recites *Hallel* every day (*Shabbos* 118b) assumes constant direct intervention and this makes it impossible to explain the phenomenon of *tzadik ve’ra lo, rasha ve’tov lo*. Clearly, the Maharal feels that direct intervention results in different outcomes than indirect *teva*.

The *Drashos HaRan*<sup>11</sup> explains that **HKBH runs the world through forces that operate at the global rather than at the individual level** and that HKBH is reluctant to intervene with these forces. The Ran cites, as an example, the plague of the firstborn in Egypt, when even the Jews, who did not inherently deserve to be punished, needed to stay in their houses to avoid being affected by the plague.

That natural forces play an independent, causal role in determining events is implied by the Ramchal in *Mesillas Yesharim* (*perek* 9). The *Mesillas Yesharim*, based on the *gemara*<sup>12</sup> (*Pesachim* 8b), says that a person must protect himself against dangers. If he fails to do so he can be harmed. The *Mesillas Yesharim* explains that the harm is both a punishment to the careless person for not following the Torah’s requirement to exercise caution and a natural consequence of his exposure to danger.

*Hashgacha pratit* (and hidden miracles as a usual phenomenon) and natural forces as causal are not mutually exclusive ideas. Natural forces, whether they relate to physics, medicine, etc., must be reckoned with.<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup> *Drush Shlishi* “*Amnam*.”

<sup>12</sup> This *gemara* is based on I Samuel 16:2. See Malbim on I Samuel 16:2.

<sup>13</sup> Ramban would include *kochavim* and *mazalos* in the same category as natural forces. See Ramban (Devarim 18:9). His discussion of *kisuf* is entirely consistent with the idea that these forces are independently causal—subject of course to divine intervention.

**These global forces will impact an individual—unless *HKBH* intervenes. And whether *HKBH* will intervene to save a person from harm is a different question than whether *HKBH* would have directly imposed this harm.** Hidden miracles can protect an individual against natural forces, but at times *HKBH* does not perform hidden miracles—and *mikra* prevails. **Natural forces are always in effect—and *HKBH* always oversees, deciding person by person and case by case when to intervene and when to let nature run its course. *Mikra* is a part of the system of *hashgacha*.** A similar approach to Ramban as suggested here is adopted by Rabbi Simcha Zissel Ziv<sup>14</sup> (the *Alter* of Kelm), Rabbi Chaim Friedlander,<sup>15</sup> Rabbi Aryeh Leibowitz,<sup>16</sup> and Rabbi Ezra Bick.<sup>17</sup> Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson<sup>18</sup> offers this as a possible approach to Ramban as well.

It is important to emphasize that vulnerability to *mikra* is not all or nothing—there are many gradations on the continuum of vulnerability. This is apparent from Rambam (*Moreh Nevuchim* 3:18). Despite whatever differences may exist between the approaches of Ramban and Rambam, I believe Ramban accepts this position of Rambam as indicated by his endorsement (Job 36:7) of Rambam’s approach to *mikra*. Otherwise I do not see a way to reconcile the ideas of average people being both subject to *mikra* and yet beneficiaries of hidden miracles. Similarly, Rabbi Moshe Cordovero (Ramak)<sup>19</sup> says that someone’s level of righteousness determines his degree of vulnerability to natural forces and illustrates with an example of a capsized ship. One person may not be sufficiently righteous to be saved although in the absence of the danger would not be punished. A person with greater merit may be worthy of being personally saved. His merit may or may not extend protection to his possessions and may or

---

<sup>14</sup> Cited in the commentary on Ramban on *Shemos* 13:16 in Ramban—Nachmanides / Commentary on the Torah Volume 3 *Shemos* / Exodus (NY: Mesorah, 2006), pp. 300–301.

<sup>15</sup> *Sifsei Chaim, Emunah V’Hashgacha, Maamarei Hashgacha Pratis U’Klallis*, Section 5.

<sup>16</sup> Aryeh Leibowitz, *Hashgacha Pratis* (Southfield: Targum Press, 2009), Part One, Chapter Three.

<sup>17</sup> Rabbi Ezra Bick, “The Purpose of Signs and Miracles According to Ramban,” <<http://www.vbm-torah.org/pesach/pes67eb.htm>>.

<sup>18</sup> *Shaarei Emunah*, Chapter 18. <<http://hebrewbooks.org/15822>>, accessed May 7, 2014.

<sup>19</sup> *Shiur Komah*, section 54, category 3. <<http://hebrewbooks.org/43949>>, accessed May 7, 2014.



may not preclude suffering in the context of being saved. A third individual's merit may warrant saving not only himself but also others impacted by the same forces.

### ***Bechira as a Type of Mikra***

The question of whether one person's actions can affect someone else is known to be controversial<sup>20</sup>—and the *Ohr Hachaim*<sup>21</sup> (*Bereishis* 37:21) and Netziv,<sup>22</sup> commenting on the story with Yosef and his brothers, adopt the position that the actions can in fact have this result. The Malbim,<sup>23</sup> commenting on David's choice to suffer a plague rather than a defeat in battle, as well as the *Metzudos Dovid* (*Daniel* 3:26), noting that Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah waited for Nebuchadnezzar's invitation to leave the furnace, similarly acknowledges the power of *bechira* to impact other people. Passages from Rambam<sup>24</sup> also imply that one person's actions can impact someone else.<sup>25</sup>

In light of the previous discussion, there seems to be an obvious mechanism through which one person's actions can affect another person. *Bechira* should not be inferior to other types of natural forces. If people are made susceptible to natural forces then they should also be susceptible to *bechira*. In fact, one of the examples of being subject to *mikra* that I cited above is vulnerability to war and thus the necessity of a Jewish army. War is a result of *bechira*. Thus if one acknowledges the existence of *mikra*, one must simultaneously allow a role for *bechira*.

The *Ohr Hachaim*, Netziv, and *Metzudos Dovid* are actually going a step further and asserting that even someone who is not subject to *mikra* in general may be susceptible to the *bechira* of another person. **A greater degree of merit is needed to protect someone from *bechira* than from other types of *mikra*.**

---

<sup>20</sup> See the discussion in Leibowitz, Part two, Chapter three.

<sup>21</sup> See *Sifsei Chaim, Emunah V'Hashgacha, Maamarei Gezeira U'Bechira* sections 2-3 for a lengthy discussion of the *Ohr Hachaim* that includes an alternative reading.

<sup>22</sup> *Harchev Davar Bereishis* 37:2.

<sup>23</sup> II Samuel 24:14; I comment further on this Malbim below.

<sup>24</sup> *Shemoneh Perakim, perek* 8 and *Moreh Nevuchim* 3:12. This is in contrast to how Rabbi Leibowitz interprets these passages in Leibowitz, Part two, Chapter three. In my opinion, the former passage implies that if a victim is predestined to die it would be difficult to understand why his murder is a crime. And the latter passage implies that one of the reasons evil exists is because of free-willed choices.

<sup>25</sup> I am citing the view of these authorities to provide context, not to argue that others (such as Ramban) share that view.

## Two Distinct Processes

Having demonstrated that a wide range of thinkers accept natural forces as causal, I now point out an important corollary to this idea. It seems to follow that adversity<sup>26</sup> can result from two distinct processes.<sup>27</sup> There are direct divine punishments that can take the form of either an open or a hidden miracle. On the other hand, there are indirect punishments that result from *HKBH* not offering protection against natural forces. While all adversity is “from *HKBH*,” two different processes are at work. Many sources accept this basic distinction (though the approaches of these thinkers may differ in some respects).

*Pesukim* in *Vayeilech* (*Devarim* 31:17-18) describe *bastaras panim*—the Jewish people suffering because *HKBH* “conceals His presence.” Rabbam in *Moreh Nevuchim* (3:51) interprets this to mean that the Jewish people’s actions distance *HKBH* with the result that they are abandoned to *mikra*—just like animals.<sup>28</sup> The Ramak<sup>29</sup> similarly understands these *pesukim* as referring to a removal of the protection of *HKBH*, resulting in vulnerability to *mikra*. The Ohr Hachaim, Malbim, and Netziv (*Haamek Davar*) also describe these *pesukim* as referring to *mikra*. Furthermore, the Abarbanel distinguishes between direct punishment and *bastaras panim* in explaining these *pesukim*.<sup>30</sup> Finally, the Ramchal in *Daas Tevunos* (*siman* 142) distinguishes between the *bastaras panim* described in these *pesukim* and the standard system of reward and punishment.<sup>31</sup>

---

<sup>26</sup> Many thinkers would contend that not all adversity fits into these two categories, and that adversity may not be a punishment at all. For example, the *Daas Tevunos simanim* 166-170 explains that many divine acts which result in misfortune are an expression of *hanbagas hamazal*, bringing the world closer to its perfection, and are not expressions of punishment which emanates from *hanbagas hamishpat*. *Hanbagas hamazal* is unrelated to what an individual deserves and thus provides an important explanation for *tzadik ve’ra lo, rasha ve’tov lo*. Note that presumably, *hanbagas hamishpat* can also lead to indirect effects similar to what I now describe above. A person cannot know if an adversity was a direct punishment, a direct expression of *hanbagas hamazal*, or an indirect punishment.

<sup>27</sup> While I focus on adversity, one could similarly distinguish between direct reward and beneficial *mikra*. See *Kuzari* 5:20, cited above.

<sup>28</sup> Rabbam previously maintained (*Moreh Nevuchim* 3:17) that individual animals are completely abandoned to *mikra*.

<sup>29</sup> *Shiur Komah*, section 54, category 10.

<sup>30</sup> The Abarbanel offers two interpretations of these *pesukim*—that they could refer to either *bastaras panim* or direct punishment.

<sup>31</sup> Interestingly, the *Meshech Chochma* (*Devarim* 31:17) faults the Jewish people for attributing their predicament described in *Vayeilech* to a lack of *hashgacha*. He says that instead, they should interpret their suffering as a direct punishment from

Many commentators explain events in Tanach based on the distinction between direct punishments and *mikra*. Rav Saadya Gaon<sup>32</sup> explains that David initially interpreted a famine as due to *mikra* as opposed to a direct punishment and therefore delayed searching for a spiritual cause. The Ralbag (Joshua 7:1) and Malbim (ibid.) explain that the consequence of Achan's sin was a removal of *hashgacha*. The resultant exposure to danger led to the deaths of 36 soldiers who did not themselves deserve to be directly punished for Achan's sin. Inversely, the Ralbag (Judges 4:8) explains that Barak requested that Devora accompany him to fight against Sisera in order to enhance the level of *hashgacha* provided to the Jewish people. The Ramak<sup>33</sup> says that due to sin, otherwise righteous people can be left vulnerable to the forces of nature. Yaakov was afraid that due to sin he would be vulnerable to brother Esav's attack. According to the Ramak, this potential vulnerability to nature provides an explanation for *tzadik ve'ra lo, rasha ve'tov lo* and also a rationale why a person can be saved from danger by natural means.

The concept of *mikra* is utilized by the Maharal<sup>34</sup> in one of his explanations of the *gemara* (*Rosh Hashanah* 16b) which explains the judgment of *Rosh Hashanah*.<sup>35</sup> The Maharal says the judgment is whether a person is protected from *mikra*. The righteous person is protected from *mikra* and allowed to live the lifespan allotted to him, while the wicked person is subject to *mikra*, which may or may not result in his premature death.

---

HKBH. Does the *Meshech Chochma* reject the concept of *mikra*? Perhaps the *Meshech Chochma* means that although sometimes it is unclear whether to interpret an event as direct *hashgacha* or as *mikra*, there are times, such as when the impact is very substantial, when it must be interpreted as direct *hashgacha*. The Abarbanel (*Bereishis* 45:1–5) asserts that an example of this was when Yosef was sold into slavery. Yosef rejected viewing this as *mikra* and insisted that a direct act of *hashgacha* was responsible for placing him in a position where he could help prepare for the impending famine. The *Kuzari* (5:20) similarly says it is unclear whether phenomena are the result of direct *hashgacha* or intermediaries but advises attributing them to *hashgacha*—certainly “for major events such as death, victory, war, success, failure, and so on” (The *Kuzari* In Defense of the Despised Faith Newly Translated and Annotated by Rabbi N. Daniel Korobkin. Jerusalem, Israel: Feldheim Publishers, 2009, p581).

<sup>32</sup> Cited in Radak, II Samuel 21:1.

<sup>33</sup> *Shiur Komab*, section 54, categories 9 and 10.

<sup>34</sup> *Chiddushei Aggados Rosh Hashanah* 16b, “*Shlosha Sefarim*.”

<sup>35</sup> The Maharal cites Samuel I 26:10 as a source for the concept of death due to *mikra*. The *Kuzari* (5:20) and Ralbag (Samuel I 26:10) understand this verse similarly.

What are the differences between the processes of direct punishments and *hastaras panim*?

Direct divine punishments seem to be “worse” than *mikra* in that they are inevitable. Abandonment to *mikra* seemingly leaves open many possibilities and does not necessarily result in adversity.<sup>36</sup> Rather, a person is “on his own”—and has to live with the natural consequences of his actions and predicament. One of Ramban’s (Job 36:7) examples of *mikra* is that the Jewish people must use natural means to fight wars. Surely the uncertainty of fighting a war with natural means is better than certain destruction!

In another sense, however, *hastaras panim* is “worse” than a direct punishment. *Mikra* means that harm can befall a person that based on the regular rules of justice he doesn’t deserve. Someone may not deserve to specifically suffer adversity—yet may also not merit to be saved from natural forces. This may be the intent of the Abarbanel (*Devarim* 31:17-18) who says that *hastaras panim* is worse than the other punishments in the Torah.

An illustration of this point is the choice made by David to suffer a plague rather than a famine or defeat in battle. The Malbim (II Samuel 24:14) explains that a famine involves natural forces and a battle involves the *bechira* of the enemy. Overcoming these forces requires a greater degree of divine intervention. In contrast, a plague is a divine act and is thus most likely to be mitigated by divine mercy.

Direct punishments contain an element of mercy and love that is absent in *hastaras panim*. The Ralbag (I Kings 19:11-12) interprets one of Eliyahu’s prophecies as saying that *HKBH* brings direct punishments only if they can accomplish a positive purpose. The message to Eliyahu was that when direct punishments failed to arouse the Jewish people to *teshuva*, the punishments stopped. The next step was to abandon them to *mikra*—to be “like a target for arrows.” The implication is that abandonment to *mikra*, unlike direct divine punishments, is not carefully measured to achieve a purpose.

This element of mercy that is present in direct punishment and absent in *hastaras panim* is further reflected in a comment of the Ohr Hachaim to the *pesukim* in *Vayeilech*. The Ohr Hachaim (*Devarim* 31:17) writes that if *HKBH* would “pay attention” to the travails of the Jewish people then He would have mercy and stop their suffering. Therefore He “hides His face”—allowing for more destructive consequences than direct punishment would inflict.

---

<sup>36</sup> See, however, the above Abarbanel for why *hastaras panim* may in fact result in inevitable suffering.

The Ramchal in *Daas Tevunos* (*simanim* 138, 142, 166) contrasts when HKBH runs the world with *hanbagas hamishpat* and when HKBH distances himself and the world is run with *bastaras panim*. He says that *mishpat* comes from HKBH's love and that "revealed rebuke originates from hidden love." As a result, punishments are delivered with love and mercy. There are times, however, when based on *hanbagas hamishpat* the world would not deserve to be sustained. During these times, the world is nonetheless allowed to continue. But such a world is run with *bastaras panim* and there is no *mishpat*—and thus no discernible love and mercy.

### Sources that Seem to Reject *Mikra*

There are sources that seem to challenge the understanding of *teva* and *mikra* that I have put forward.

Rabbi Aryeh Leibowitz<sup>37</sup> demonstrates that various thinkers, including Hasidic thinkers and the Vilna Gaon, maintain that *hashgacha pratis* encompasses even non-humans (in contrast to Rambam, Ramban, Rabbenu Bechaya,<sup>38</sup> and others who say it does not). He refers to their approach as the "Expansive Approach." This expansive approach to *hashgacha pratis* seems to contradict the notion of *teva* being causal.

Similarly, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson understands that the Baal Shem Tov connects the concept of *hashgacha* to the concept that HKBH constantly renews the creation.<sup>39</sup> This is why *hashgacha* encompasses everything, even inanimate objects, plants, and animals. He even suggests<sup>40</sup> that Rambam could be consistent with this approach.

Seemingly in contrast to the Ramchal in *Mesillas Yesharim* (*perek* 9) cited above, the Ramchal in *Daas Tevunos* (*siman* 36) stresses that the will of HKBH alone—and not *teva*—determines what happens in the world: "...that He alone supervises with individual providence and nothing occurs in His world except through His will and His hand, not through chance, not through nature, and not through *mazal*..." Also, he writes in *Mesillas Yesharim* (*perek* 19), based on the *gemara* (*Berachos* 60b), that everything that HKBH does with respect to each person is beneficial to him.

Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook<sup>41</sup> writes that miracles demonstrate that HKBH is in complete control and thus natural laws do not result in unin-

---

<sup>37</sup> Leibowitz, Part One, Chapter Four.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> For more on this concept see Korobkin, p. 586 footnote 178.

<sup>40</sup> *Shaarei Emunah*, Chapter 19.

<sup>41</sup> *Ein Aya Brachos* 9:1-2.

tended consequences—“even small details are intentional.” Even small details should not be considered *mikra*, mere collateral damage—“even something that could possibly be attributed to mikra, one should realize that it has a constructive purpose.”

The Chazon Ish<sup>42</sup> similarly defines *bitachon* as the belief that “there is no *mikra*—all that happens is declared by Him.”

I would suggest that there need not be a contradiction between these ideas and the notion that natural forces are causal.<sup>43</sup> *HKBH* created the world (or continually creates the world) with an ordered system of natural laws. **These laws have a causal impact in the sense that they can result in a different outcome compared with if *HKBH* did not will that these laws operate. The natural laws alter the decision calculus of what will ultimately happen.** If, however, given all relevant considerations, there was no constructive purpose in allowing nature to “take its course,” then, according to some opinions, *HKBH* would in fact intervene.<sup>44</sup>

The Ramchal is not arguing that *teva* (or *mazal* for that matter) has no causal role—only that the will of *HKBH* is the ultimate determinant. While there is a system of laws through which *HKBH* runs the world, these laws are fully subject to the will of *HKBH*. As the Ramchal in *Daas Tevunos* explicitly writes a few lines later: “...and all of the systems of justice and all of the laws that he embedded—are all dependent on His will, and He is not forced by them in any way.” It is the will of *HKBH* that these laws operate.<sup>45</sup>

---

<sup>42</sup> *Emunah U'Bitachon* beginning of *Perek* 2, Section 1.

<sup>43</sup> I am only suggesting that these sources accept the basic premise of *teva* as causal. For example, some of the sources cited earlier may not agree that *HKBH* will intervene such that every outcome ultimately has a constructive purpose. But the disagreement is limited to under what circumstances *HKBH* chooses to intervene—all can agree that the natural order is causal.

<sup>44</sup> I believe that what I am suggesting here differs from what Rabbi Aryeh Leibowitz suggests in Leibowitz, Part One, Chapter Five. If I understand him correctly, he equates *hanbagas hayichud* with *teva*—“G-d’s governance through the system of *hanbagas ha-yichud* is called nature, *teva* ... The system of nature, *teva*, is really the mask that hides an unfolding G-dly process of divine revelation (Leibowitz, pp. 105-106).” I am arguing that *teva* can be a mask for *hanbagas hamishpat* just as it can be a mask for *hanbagas hayichud* and furthermore that neither *hanbagas hayichud* nor *hanbagas hamishpat* precludes that *teva* can also be causal.

<sup>45</sup> The purpose of these laws, according to the *Daas Tevunos* (siman 36), is to enable the ultimate revelation of the Oneness of *HKBH*: “It emerges that the revelation of this Oneness is what The Supreme Will desired, and based on this intention He embedded laws to govern His creations.”

Rav Kook in fact seems to accept the causal role of *teva* in describing the negative health impacts of overindulging in food and also describes *teva* as a force that is balanced by opposing, spiritual forces.<sup>46</sup>

Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler<sup>47</sup> describes *teva* as nothing more than an illusion that is not causal, and strongly criticizes the belief that *teva* is causal by characterizing those who adopt this perspective as guilty of believing that “by my own might I have achieved all of this.” He interprets<sup>48</sup> Rambam (*Moreh Nevuchim* 3:18) and *Seforno* (*Vayikra* 13:47), who appear to limit *hashgacha*, as drawing a distinction between *hashgacha pratis* and *hashgacha klalis*. In Rav Dessler’s approach, those who do not deserve *hashgacha pratis* are not abandoned to the vicissitudes of nature. The difference between someone who receives *hashgacha pratis* and someone who receives *hashgacha klalis* is that the former is judged with respect to their own role in furthering the purpose of creation, while the latter is treated as an instrument in enabling the righteous to further that purpose—but everyone is guided by continuous *hashgacha*. Rav Dessler’s approach seems to be inconsistent with my assertion that natural forces are causal.

### Adopting the Proper Perspective

I have argued that a far-reaching belief in *hashgacha pratis* does not conflict with a causal understanding of *teva* and *bechira*. *Teva* can be causal, and this provides a sound basis for the need to engage the world using natural means. At the same time, the existence of hidden miracles (and the fact that hidden miracles are a usual phenomenon) offers a solid basis for a spiritual response to danger, adversity, and suffering. When faced with danger, one can and ought to bear in mind that nothing precludes the possibility of divine intervention.

Even if adversity is due to *mikra*, vulnerability to natural forces reveals a lack of divine protection, and this is due to spiritual causes. The Abarbanel (*Devarim* 31:17-18) says that the Jewish people, having been abandoned to *mikra*, are faulted for not realizing that their abandonment to *mikra* is a consequence of their attachment to *avodah zarah*. The Ralbag (I Kings 19:12) also stresses that the Jewish people are supposed to view a lack of *hashgacha* as a consequence of sin.

Rambam in *Mishna Torah* (*Taanios* 1) cautions against interpreting misfortunes as simply the result of natural forces—rather, these misfortunes should be an impetus to *teshuvah*. I would suggest that this indicates

---

<sup>46</sup> *Ein Aya Brachos* 6:34 and 9:131, respectively.

<sup>47</sup> *Michtav M’Eliyahu*, Volume 1, *HaNes V’Hateva*, *HaTeva—Hester Nissim*.

<sup>48</sup> *Michtav M’Eliyahu*, Volume 2, *Yamim Noraim*, *Sbnei Yomim Shel Rosh Hashanah*.

that Rambam agrees<sup>49</sup> that vulnerability to *mikra* is an expression of *hashgacha*—and is thus a call to *teshuva*. Rabbi Yosef Dov Soloveitchik<sup>50</sup> also understands Rambam that susceptibility to *mikra* needs to be understood as reflecting a spiritual lack and is thus an opportunity for growth:

The fundamental of providence is here transformed into a concrete commandment, an obligation incumbent upon man. Man is obliged to broaden the scope and strengthen the intensity of the individual providence that watches over him. Everything is dependent on him; it is all in his hands. When a person creates himself, ceases to be a mere species man, and becomes a man of G-d, then he has fulfilled that commandment which is implicit in the principle of providence.



---

<sup>49</sup> See earlier footnote (#9) for sources that provide perspective on Rambam's approach to miracles and *hashgacha*.

<sup>50</sup> Soloveitchik, Joseph B., *Halakic Man*. (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1983), pp. 123–128.