

## *Divine Providence—Goals, Hopes and Fears;* כי כל דרכיו משפט

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In MN 3:17, Rambam presents five opinions regarding Divine Providence. When introducing the fifth opinion, “our opinion, I mean the opinion of our Law” he presents it in two parts—the Torah as understood by everybody else and his own understanding of it. Here is how he puts it:

“I will show you [first] what has been literally expressed on this subject in our prophetic books, and generally accepted by the multitude of our scholars. I will then give the opinion of some of our latter day scholars, and lastly, I will explain my own belief.”<sup>2</sup>

When presenting his own opinions he prefaces it as follows:

“My opinion on this principle of Divine Providence I will now explain to you. In the principle which I now proceed to expound, I do not rely on the conclusion to which demonstration has led me, but on what has clearly appeared as the intention of the book of God, and the writings of our Prophets. The principle which I accept contains fewer incongruities,<sup>3</sup> and is nearer to intellectual reasoning than the opinions mentioned before.”

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<sup>1</sup> I thank Rabbi Asher Benzion Buchman for the discussions we had on this subject and for reading and commenting on an earlier draft. I also thank the *Shabbat Haburah* who so patiently listened to my exposition and shared their insights.

<sup>2</sup> All quotations from *The Guide of the Perplexed* (MN heretofore) are from the online Friedlander translation at <http://www.sacred-texts.com/jud/gfp/index.htm> with my own changes where I felt it necessary, using the Shlomo Pines edition.

<sup>3</sup> Pines and Friedlander translate “less disgraceful.”

We learn from these statements that the issue of Divine Providence contains inherent conflicts between the literal text of Tanakh, possible interpretations of that text and rational thought. We also learn that Providence is not an empirically provable concept but rather an ontological view of our daily life based on Revelation. Without revelation—the writings of our prophets—we would come to different conclusions about Providence. The challenge is to accommodate our independent conclusions with those the Prophets teach us. Rambam proposes to do that and believes his approach is the best. We, however, get the message that the most we can expect is that it will “contain fewer incongruities and is nearer to intellectual reasoning” but ultimately the two will never be 100% in accord. However, Rambam sees Divine Providence as the most fundamental concept in Judaism, the *raison d’être* of all the laws and rituals of the Torah, the ultimate religious experience.

In this article, I will present my reading of Rambam on this subject.<sup>4</sup> After a brief overview of the four other opinions, I will try to show that Rambam understands that everything in the Universe functions according to the laws of nature, that is Providence, while humankind alone has the ability to avail itself of Divine Providence. Each individual human being has the potential to remove himself from the influence of Providence and act according to Divine Providence. It is a gradual process with different consequences at different stages of a person’s development and growth. I will also explore this from both the perspectives of that person and those who observe him. I believe this will give us an insight into what we call God’s justice and the hopes and doubts that a person faces in his quest for Divine Providence.

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<sup>4</sup> Much has been written on this subject. For an extensive bibliography see Professor Israel J. Dienstag in *Da’at* volume 20 (Winter 1988). In the twenty-nine years since that article appeared, much more has been published on Rambam’s Divine Providence. Of note is the “Siḥot al Mivḥar Pirkei ha-Hashgāḥa” by Prof. Yeshayahu Leibowitz. Prof. Sarah Klein Braslavy in her “Perush ha-Rambam le-Sipurim al Adam be-Parashat Bereshit” addresses many of these issues.

## **Providence: a Definition**

Rambam summarily dismisses the opinion that there is no Providence, that everything is random. He ascribes this opinion to Epicurus and the Atomists among the Greek philosophers. To understand his argument we need to first define what Rambam refers to as Providence. When we look at the universe, we discern a logical system that we call nature. There is a consistency to it and we can predict phenomena. That is the basis for the sciences. Medieval philosophers saw that as Providence. The question whether these laws can be traced to an entity, if that entity has prescience and therefore controls and sometimes manipulates them, were separate theological questions. Those that accepted the existence of such an entity referred to its role in the governance of the universe as Providence too. In other words, Providence is a general term describing a logical natural system,<sup>5</sup> whether it is caused by an outside entity or not. We will call this type of Providence, *Hanebagah* rather than the more commonly used term *Hashgahah*.

In antiquity, it was not clear that there was a definite system of cause and effect which explained existence. Rambam understood the Atomists to believe that everything is random. The universe is composed of minute particles that combine randomly, bringing things into existence. There is no law, only probability.<sup>6</sup> In MN 2:20 Rambam contrasts the two opinions, those who believe in randomness versus those who believe in a system and explains:

According to Aristotle, none of the products of Nature are due to chance. His proof is this: That which is due to chance does not reappear constantly or frequently, but all products of Nature reappear either constantly or at least frequently.

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<sup>5</sup> For an interesting observation on Rambam's understanding, see Prof. Avraham Nuriel, *Galuy Vesamuy Baphilosophia Hayehudit Be'yemei Habeina'yim*, Magnes Press 2000, pp. 83-92.

<sup>6</sup> See <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/democritus/#2> "According to different reports, Democritus ascribed the causes of things to necessity, and also to chance. Probably the latter term should be understood as 'absence of purpose' rather than a denial of necessity (Barnes 1982, pp. 423-6)." Apparently, Rambam understood the Atomists cause as chance.

Rambam then proceeds to accept Aristotle's argument against these philosophers based on the observation that phenomena are repetitive, predictable and many are constant. This explains his rejection outright of the first opinion that Providence does not exist. To Rambam, it is an offshoot of the Atomists' theory that everything is random.

### **Providence without revelation—Aristotle according to Rambam**

The second opinion is how Rambam understands<sup>7</sup> Aristotle's concept of Divine Providence.<sup>8</sup> To Aristotle, Providence is the way things operate naturally so as to perpetuate their existence. "He believes that Providence is in accordance with the nature of what exists" (MN 3:17). Looking at the different things that exist we note that there is an order and logic to how things operate. The basic elements have no ability to propel or change themselves; they are dependent on outside influences to allow for change. As we go up in levels towards sentience, there is more self-sufficiency, so to say. A rock is always changed from the outside while a vegetable or a fruit takes in nutrients and grows spontaneously. Animals can propel themselves and have an innate ability to feed and defend themselves. Humans have the further ability to think and make rational choices. With these different abilities, each species has a built in blueprint for survival. Each species' ability is tailored to its needs for continuity.

"In man there is a certain force which unites the members of the body, controls them, and gives to each of them what it requires for the conservation of its condition and for the repulsion of injury—the physicians distinctly call it the leading force in the body of the living being: sometimes they

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<sup>7</sup> I qualify by attributing the opinions of the Greeks to Rambam's understanding of them. Greek philosophy got to Rambam through the translation and thus prism of Arab philosophers. For example, the idea of Divinity in Aristotle's thought is an interpretation of his philosophy and not necessarily Aristotle's own opinion.

<sup>8</sup> It is also as we will see, the rational explanation that needs to be adapted to fit with "the writings of the prophets."

call it ‘nature.’ The Universe likewise possesses a force which unites the several parts with each other, protects the species from destruction, maintains the individuals of each species for the time it is possible to safeguard them, and also safeguards some of the individuals of the world.” (MN 1:72)

Although not all individuals within each category or species survive long enough for them to contribute to the continuity of their group, enough do. Thus, Aristotle sees the groups as existing by design or Providence while each individual within the group is subject to pure chance.<sup>9</sup> Providence understood thus is just another way of describing observed phenomena. We see individual components of a group sometimes destroyed without leaving a trace. We therefore attribute that to chance. We also see that species in the broader sense tend to survive. They must therefore exist within the bounds of a system that preserves them which we call Providence. Rambam translates this Aristotelian idea into practical daily life as follows:

All other movements, however, which are made by the individual members of each species, are due to accident. They are not, according to Aristotle, the result of rule and management. When a storm or gale blows, it causes undoubtedly some leaves of a tree to drop, breaks off some branches of another tree, tears away a stone from a heap of stones, raises dust over herbs and spoils them, and stirs up the sea so that a ship goes down with the whole or part of her contents. Aristotle sees no difference between the falling of a leaf or a stone and the death of the good and noble people in the ship. He does not distinguish between the destruction of a multitude of ants caused by an ox depositing on them his excrement and the death of worshippers killed by the fall of the house when its foundations give way. He does not discriminate between the case of a cat killing a mouse that happens to come in her way, or that of a spider catching a fly, and that of a hungry lion meeting a prophet and tearing him. In short, the opinion of Aristotle is this: Everything, according to what he saw, that does not come to an end and does not change any of its properties

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<sup>9</sup> Because Rambam accepts this opinion partially, as we will see, it is popular to claim that Rambam believes in *Hashgabah* for species and not for individuals. That is an erroneous contention as we will show.

subsists by governance. That includes the heavenly beings, and everything which continues according to a certain rule, and deviates from it only rarely and exceptionally, as is the case in objects of Nature. All these are the result of governance in a close relation to Divine Providence. But that which is not constant, and does not follow a certain rule, as for instance the circumstances of the individual beings in each species of plants or animals, whether rational or irrational, is due to chance and not to governance; it is in no relation to Divine Providence. (MN 3:17)

To Aristotle there are only two possibilities—governance by Providence, which he calls Divine Providence, and random chance. Constancy is Divine while unruliness is chance. Furthermore, as Rambam points out, Aristotle does not accept the existence of Will as it relates to God. Although there is a sense of planning and design in the universe it is not the result of an act of will but rather a natural phenomenon.

This view is closely connected with his theory of the Eternity of the Universe and with his opinion that everything different from the existing order of things in Nature is impossible. It is the belief of those who turned away from our Law, and said, “God hath forsaken the earth” (Ezekiel 9:9). (*Ibid.*)

Those who believe in the eternity of the universe, like Aristotle, accept the existence of a First Cause which Rambam refers to as God. Together with the Universe, there eternally was (is) a hierarchically higher entity that, by its nature, causes existence.<sup>10</sup> That entity does not choose to do so; it is just inherent in its nature. That entity is the source of Aristotelian (according to Rambam) Divine Providence. Rambam’s key objection to Aristotle’s approach is the statement: “Aristotle sees no difference between the falling of a leaf or a stone and the death of the good and noble people in the ship. He does not distinguish between the destruction of a multitude of ants caused by an ox depositing on them his excrement and the death of worshippers killed by the fall of the house when its foundations

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<sup>10</sup> It is important to understand that First Cause does not imply creation or a beginning. All it says is that there must be a non-contingent entity. For more detail, see my article in *Hakirah*, Volume 3, on miracles.

give way. He does not discriminate between the case of a cat killing a mouse that happens to come in her way, or that of a spider catching a fly, and that of a hungry lion meeting a prophet and tearing him.” Divine Providence that is caused by a divinity that lacks will does not discriminate.<sup>11</sup> That explains Rambam’s comment that it is against our Law—the Torah. The idea of reward and punishment is one of the most important concepts in Judaism and this purely naturalistic approach is anathema to it. The problem is that Aristotle’s position is based on our observations and fits with how things work. How does a religious person address this?

### **The Asharite<sup>12</sup> Solution—a Whimsical Divine Providence**

The Asharite School goes to the other extreme and sees everything as the result of God’s will. The wind that blows, the leaf that falls, the ant killed by the animal’s excrement or the person that sinks with the ship are all the result of God’s immediate will. God has decided for this to happen exactly then and in this way. We have no explanation for it nor should we expect one. It is God’s will. That extends to human action. We act because God wants us to act now and in this way. If we are punished it is because God willed it and is not necessarily the result of our action.

The supporters of this theory hold that it was the will of God to send prophets, to command, to forbid, to promise, and to threaten, although we have no power [over our actions]. A duty would thus be imposed upon us which is impossible for us to carry out, and it is even possible that we may suffer punishment when obeying the command and receive reward when disobeying it. (MN 3:17)

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<sup>11</sup> See MN 2:25 towards the end on this issue and a discussion in my article on miracles in *Hakirah*, Volume 3.

<sup>12</sup> The Ash'ari madhhab (Arabic الأشاعرة *al-asha'irah*) is a school of early Muslim speculative theology named after its founder, the theologian Abu al-Hasan al-Ash'ari (d. 945). The disciples of the school are known as Ash'arites, and the school is also referred to as the Ash'arite School (Answers.com).

This opinion resolves the problem of God having will but creates a host of other problems. It negates the possibility of scientific analysis; there is really no repeatable phenomenon without God willing it. There also is no justice. We cannot even explain coherently reward or punishment as there is no relationship between an act and its consequence. It depicts God as a whimsical entity.

It is therefore possible, according to the Ash'aryyah, that God inflicts pain on a good and pious man in this world, and keeps him forever in fire, which is assumed to rage in the world to come and they simply say it is the Will of God. (MN 3:17)

### **The Mu'tazilites<sup>13</sup> Solution—God's Unfathomable Wisdom**

The Mu'tazilite School, which also has many followers among some of the early Jewish thinkers,<sup>14</sup> accepts that man has free will and can choose to do good or evil. God rewards those who do good and punishes those who are evil. However, we humans do not know what is good for us or bad. God is the sole judge and He being just, makes sure that it is really good or really bad. In fact, some followers of this school say that even non-sentient beings operate according to a just system.

They hold also that God takes notice of the falling of the leaf and the destruction of the ant, and that His Providence extends over all things. (MN 3:17)

The fact that some things sometimes look unjust, when we cannot explain why a good man should perish in a mishap, means

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<sup>13</sup> Mu'tazilah (Arabic المعتزلة *al-mu'tazilah*) is a theological school of thought within Islam. It is also spelled Mu'tazilite, or Mu'tazilah (Answers.com).

<sup>14</sup> The Mu'tazilite school influenced many Jewish thinkers of the middle ages. They influenced the thinking of R. Sa'adyah Gaon, R. Shmuel Ben Hofni, Rav Hay Gaon, R. Nissim Gaon and others. Traces of this school are also found in the *Hovot Halevavot* of R. Behayyei Ibn Pakuda. Rambam addresses many of the positions of this school throughout the MN.

that we do not really know what is good for him. Rambam of course sees this as irrational:

The incongruities are as follows. The fact that some human individual is born with infirmities without having sinned they say it is the wisdom of God and it is better for such a person to be thus than to be sound in body. Though we do not see why it is better, we say that this has not happened as a punishment for him but as a benefit. In a similar manner, the slaughter of the pious is explained as being for them the source of an increase of reward in future life. They go even further in their incongruities. We ask them why is God only just to man and not to other beings? Because of what sin has this particular animal been slaughtered? They reply it is better for the animal so that God will compensate in the world to come. Even when a flea and a louse are killed, it is necessary for them to have compensation from God. The same reasoning they apply to the mouse torn by a cat or vulture; the wisdom of God decreed this for the mouse, in order to reward it after death for the mishap. (MN 3:17)

## **The Torah's Ontological Axioms**

Having presented us with the four opinions about Providence Rambam now introduces us to three beliefs (ontological axioms) accepted universally by all followers of the Torah. The challenge facing the man of religion is to understand them in the context of his observations of reality.

### 1. Free will:

The theory of man's perfectly free will is one of the fundamental principles of the Law of our Teacher Moses, and of those who follow the Law. According to this principle, man does what is in his power to do, by his nature, his choice, and his will; and this without there being created for his benefit in any way any newly produced thing.<sup>15</sup> All species of irrational animals likewise move by their own free will<sup>16</sup> (MN 3:17).

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<sup>15</sup> Rav Kafih notes that Rambam is referring to the theory of some of the *Mutakallamin* (or Kalam – a school of Islamic theology that included the

2. God wills:

This is the Will of God; that is to say, it is due to the eternal divine will that all living beings should move freely, and that man should have power to act according to his will or choice within the limits of his capacity.<sup>17</sup> (MN 3:17)

3. God is just:

Wrong cannot be ascribed to God in any way whatever; all evils and afflictions as well as all kinds of happiness of man, whether they concern one individual person or a community, are determined according to the deserts of the men concerned; they are the result of equitable judgment that admits no injustice whatever.<sup>18</sup> Even when a person suffers pain in consequence of a thorn having entered into his hand, although it is at once drawn out, it is a punishment for him. The slightest pleasure he enjoys is a reward [for some good action]; all this being according to his deserts; as is said in Scripture, “all his ways are judgment” (Deut. xxxii. 4). But we are ignorant of the various modes of deserts.<sup>19</sup> (MN 3:17)

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Asharite and Mu'tazilite schools) who believed that every action is the result of a specific will of God. (See the sixth premise in MN 1:73.)

<sup>16</sup> Free will in animals is of course not the same as in man. An animal acts following its natural instinct; it can however sometimes choose which victim is going to be its next meal. That in itself is seen as freedom of choice. Rambam objects to the idea that this type of freedom deserves reward or punishment, as we will see.

<sup>17</sup> For an interesting discussion on this issue, see MN 2:47.

<sup>18</sup> It is interesting to note that it is after the segment about free will, and not after the second segment about justice, that Rambam makes the following comment: “Against this principle we hear, thank God, no opposition on the part of our nation.” He is not confident that all agree that God is just!

<sup>19</sup> Rav Kafih translates *נעשו ראויים היאך יודעים* and refers us to *Hilkhot Teshuvah* 5-7. Michael Schwartz does similarly while Pines translates; “we do not know the mode of the desert.” In *Hilkhot Teshuvah* 6:1, however we read *והקדוש ברוך הוא יודע היאך ייפרע* seemingly like Pines. On the other hand, in 3:2 we read *הוא היודע היאך עורכין הזכיות* which is closer to R. Kafih and Schwartz. Is Rambam discussing whether the reward or punishment is commensurate with the deed or how the deed itself is judged?

From the four opinions presented so far the Mu'tazilite opinion comes closest to satisfying all three rules.<sup>20</sup> Where they get into difficulties is with rule 3. We do see righteous people suffering.<sup>21</sup> They therefore explain that the suffering is really, for that person's own good so that he can earn points and be rewarded in the world to come.

It is therefore possible, according to the Ash'aryyah, that God inflicts pain on a good and pious man in this world, and keeps him forever in the fire which is assumed to rage in the world to come and they simply say it is the Will of God. The Mu'tazilites would consider this as injustice, and therefore assume that every being, even an ant, that is stricken with pain [in this world], has compensation for it, as has been mentioned above; and it is due to God's Wisdom that a being is struck and afflicted in order to receive compensation. (MN 3:17)

The Mu'tazilites' explanation cannot be seen as justice but rather as some ultimate wisdom that the recipient and his observers cannot fathom. As the Torah explicitly tells us that God is just each of the preceding opinions falls short. Rambam notes that some Rabbis seem to have taken a position similar to that of the Mu'tazilites when they proposed the concept of "afflictions of love."<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Aristotle's position at first blush seems to contradict rule 2 since for him there is no divine will. He also finds rule 3 difficult to deal with because for him there cannot be a direct reward and punishment system. True actions have consequences but that is a generality. There are many exception and therefore no strict justice. The Asharite who believe in an absolute divine will have a problem with rule 1 and 3.

<sup>21</sup> Prof. Yonah Willamowsky pointed out that according to the Mu'tazilite the good or bad can occur even before an action of a person. There really is no relationship between an act and a consequence. That is why Rambam refers to it as *Hakbmah*. Rabbi Avrohom Lieberman brought to my attention that the Gemara in Berakhot 5a seems to confirm this insight: אמר רבא אמר רב סחורה אמר רב הונא: כל שהקדוש ברוך הוא חפץ בו – מדכאו. ביסורין, שנאמר (ישעיהו נ"ג) וה' חפץ דכאו החלי.

<sup>22</sup> *Berakhot* 5a.

But they contain an additional doctrine which is not found in the text of the Torah namely the doctrine of “afflictions of love,” as taught by some of our Sages. According to this doctrine, it is possible that a person suffer misfortunes without having previously committed any sin, in order that his future reward may be greater. This is also the teaching of the Mu’tazilites. But there is no text in the Torah expressing this notion.

Although Rambam does not dismiss this idea outright, his comment about it not being found in the Torah indicates that he does not accept it.<sup>23</sup> He also dismisses other opinions found in later Gaonic literature that suggest that Divine Justice extends to non-sentient beings too.<sup>24</sup> He attributes these opinions to the erroneous acceptance of a Mu’tazilite position and points out that the latter opinion cannot be found even in Talmudic sources.

In discussing the third rule, which states that God is just, Rambam adds an additional element that has great impact on our understanding of his position about Divine Providence. Rambam, based on several of our Rabbis’ sayings, understands them to hold that the definition of what is right or wrong is not necessarily limited to the obligations and prohibitions of the Torah or other prophets but includes what is judged to be right or wrong by the “inborn disposition” of man.

Our Sages declare it wherever opportunity is given, that for God justice is necessary and obligatory. That God will reward the obedient individual for all his pious and righteous actions, although no direct commandment was given to him through a prophet and that he is punished for all evil acts, although they have not been

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<sup>23</sup> It is quite interesting that although the Gemara has a long discussion about afflictions of love, Rambam uses the argument that since this idea is not found in the written text of Tanakh it is suspect. Does this imply that a Hazzal that discusses a *hashkafic* matter without anchoring it in Tanakh is suspect? I believe that further study of this particular issue is warranted.

<sup>24</sup> Reading this one cannot avoid noting that Rambam does not expend too much effort on presenting the opinion of his predecessors although he promised to do so at the start of the discussion.

prohibited by a prophet,<sup>25</sup> this being forbidden by the inborn disposition. I refer to the prohibition against wrongdoing and injustice. Thus, our Sages say: “The Holy One blessed be He, does not withhold from a creature that which it has deserved.”<sup>26</sup> They also say, “He who says that God is indulgent [in forgiving] should have his bowels torn; He is long-suffering, but is sure to exact payment.”<sup>27</sup> Another saying is this: “He who does a thing having been commanded [to do it] does not resemble him who does [it] without having been commanded.”<sup>28</sup> Thus, they have made it clear that even he, who does a good thing without being commanded, is given his reward. The same principle is expressed in all sayings of our Sages. (MN 3:17)

There is a “natural law” which dictates what is right or wrong independent of revelation. Furthermore, there are consequences for both following and ignoring that law. There is justice even when man acts according to his inborn disposition.

### **Introductions to Rambam’s opinion**

Before proceeding to discuss Rambam’s own opinion, we have to define certain terms and concepts that will be used in the upcoming discussion. Looking at the presentation in MN of the chapters on Providence, we find that after discussing Yechezkel’s vision of the Chariot, Rambam first clarifies the concept of *Homer* and *Tzura*—Matter and Form.<sup>29</sup> He then discusses whether nonbeing is the direct result of an action or just accidental e.g., is darkness a separate entity that can be created or is it just the lack of light?<sup>30</sup> Understanding this helps us to define good and evil, as we will see. He then dedicates two chapters<sup>31</sup> each to good and evil as it applies to man in society and his environment and a discussion of the purpose of material

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<sup>25</sup> Rambam is saying that right and wrong can be determined even without revelation, not that revelation does not support it.

<sup>26</sup> *Pesahim* 118a.

<sup>27</sup> *Bava Kamma* 50a.

<sup>28</sup> *Kiddushin* 31a.

<sup>29</sup> MN 3:8-9.

<sup>30</sup> MN 3:10.

<sup>31</sup> MN 3:11-12 and MN 3:13-14 respectively.

existence. Another chapter deals with divine omnipotence and its limitations<sup>32</sup> followed by an introductory chapter<sup>33</sup> regarding God's omniscience. Only after these preparatory chapters does he discuss Providence. Rambam is setting the tone for the upcoming discussion making sure that we come to it with the proper perspective.

### ***Homer and Zurab—Matter and Form and the Uniqueness of the Form of Man***

The concept of Matter and Form in Aristotelian physics is foreign to our contemporary understanding of science. It was a way of explaining how the non-physical “idea” or “concept” interacts with the physical world.<sup>34</sup> It visualized everything material as composed of a physical entity and the concept behind it. The example used<sup>35</sup> is a table where the artisan who has the picture of the final product in his mind takes a formless piece of wood and molds it into its final form. The “picture in his mind” is the Form which somehow is now actualized in the final object. Looked at relatively, Matter is controlled by Form. Matter will not change without Form acting on it; in fact, it will not “exist” without Form, or concept preceding its existence. Form will also not be actualized without interacting with Matter. They are always interdependent.<sup>36</sup> Matter also has the propensity to change.<sup>37</sup> It takes on a certain form and with time, it

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<sup>32</sup> See Yitzchak Grossman's article in *Hakirah*, Volume 2.

<sup>33</sup> This discussion is resumed after the chapters dealing directly with Providence.

<sup>34</sup> The mind–body relationship is an old philosophical debate that is still ongoing. *The Self and its Brain, an Argument for Interactionism*, Karl Popper and John C. Eccles, is a good starting point. See Yeshayahu Leibowitz excellent booklet *Guf Venefesh*. See Keith Campbell, *Body and Mind* for a good synopsis of all positions on the subject.

<sup>35</sup> See *Milot ha-Hegayon*, Magnes Press, chapter 9.

<sup>36</sup> לעולם אין אתה רואה גולם בלא צורה או צורה בלא גולם, אלא לב האדם הוא שמחלק גוף הנמצא בדעתו ויודע שהוא מחובר מגולם וצורה, ויודע שיש שם גופים שגולמם מחובר מארבעת היסודות, וגופים שגולמם פשוט ואינו מחובר רק מגולם אחד, והצורות שאין להם גולם אינן נראין לעין אלא בעין הלב הן ידועין, כמו שידענו אדון הכל בלא ראיית עין (רמב"ם יסודי התורה ד:ז).

<sup>37</sup> Of course, there has to be an entity that conceptualizes the Form that will be appended to Matter but that is a different subject.

starts to deteriorate, return to its original and is now ready to receive a different Form.<sup>38</sup>

A concept is perpetual; therefore Form which represents the concept of a thing is also perpetual. It is true that without Matter it is not actualized. However it is the lack of matter which is the cause of this, not Form itself. Thus:

Do you not see that all the specific Forms are perpetual and permanent? Form can only be destroyed accidentally, i.e., on account of its connection with Matter. (MN 3:8)

What is the Form of a man? As man is part of the animal kingdom, what concept differentiates him from all other members of that category of species? Just as the relationship of Form and Matter in general is symbiotic and interdependent, so it is with man. For the concept or Form of man to be actualized it needs a living<sup>39</sup> body which is Matter in this relationship. There is, however, a marked difference between the Form of man and of other things whether living or inert. The actualization of Form in all things other than man is accomplished by finding a body, Matter, for it to attach itself. The Form in man however is only in a potential stage at the moment of attachment to a body. All the normal thought processes related to

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<sup>38</sup> Rambam understands that this concept of Matter is represented metaphorically as a promiscuous woman who always pursues different men and constantly seeks out new companions. “How extraordinary is what Shlomo Hamelech said in his wisdom when likening matter to a married harlot, for matter is never found without form, and is therefore always like a woman who is never separated from a man and is never free. However, though being wedded, constantly seeks another man in the place of her husband: she entices and attracts him in every possible manner until he obtains from her what her husband used to obtain. The same is the case with matter. Whatever form it has, it is disposed to receive another form; it never leaves off moving and casting off the form which it has in order to receive another. The same takes place when this second form is received” (MN 3:8).

<sup>39</sup> Unlike other *rishonim*, for example Ramban as understood by many, the life force is not part of the Form but of the Matter in man just like it is in all other living things. See Ramban *Bereshit* 2:7 for his understanding and a careful reading of the first chapter of Rambam’s *Avot Eight Chapters* (henceforth ‘SP’) for Rambam’s position.

decisions that man makes to insure his physical survival, all functions of the brain, are seen as no more than an evolved animal. Just as all animals have characteristics that help them survive in their environment, nature has given man an evolved brain to give him advantages in his environment.

This attribute has been given only to man on account of his peculiar faculty of thinking; I mean the intellect which is the hylic intellect which appertains to no other living being. This may be explained as follows. An animal does not require for its sustenance any plan, thought or scheme; each animal moves and acts by its nature, eats as much as it can find of suitable things, it makes its resting-place wherever it happens to be, cohabits with any mate it meets while in heat in the periods of its sexual excitement. In this manner does each individual conserve itself for a certain time, and perpetuates the existence of its species without requiring for its maintenance the assistance or support of any of its fellow creatures: for all the things to which it has to attend it performs by itself. With man it is different; if an individual had a solitary existence, and were, like an animal, left without guidance, he would soon perish, he would not endure even one day, unless it were by mere chance, unless he happened to find something upon which he might feed. For the food, which man requires for his subsistence demands much work and preparation, which can only be accomplished by reflection and by plan. (MN 1:72)

Therefore -

Eating, drinking, sexual intercourse, and his passionate desire for these things, as well as his anger and all bad habits found in him are all of them consequent upon his Matter. (MN 3:8)

Although this intellect differentiates man from other animal species, it does not define him as the unique species he has the potential to be. Using his intellect to procure the needs for his physical survival without any self-reflection pertains to Matter as it is there only to serve it. It is man's ability to think abstractly, to be self reflective thus seeking to understand his own existence and to go

beyond the immediate urge by controlling his impulses<sup>40</sup> that defines his uniqueness.

Thus the knowledge of God, the formation of ideas, the mastery of desire and passion, the distinction between that which is to be chosen and that which is to be rejected, all these man owes to his form. (MN 3:8)<sup>41</sup>

This ability does not come to man at the moment of his coming into existence. It is an acquired quality that he develops as he grows. The ability to observe himself from the outside, to judge right from wrong, self-control beyond his physical needs and thinking conceptually all pertain to man's Form. It is what differentiates him from the animal kingdom. We can summarize by saying that all thought related to promoting his physical existence pertains to Matter; it is part and parcel of man's physical survival mechanism. The ability to observe his own existence and draw conclusions from this observation is man's Form, his essence. Both thought processes are the product of the same ability to think and the questions raised about our existence are intertwined with the ones about our survival.

What further differentiates man's Form from all the other Forms of material entities is that it is interactive and has an osmotic relationship with its own Matter. They both influence each other and live in constant tension with each other. Man has the autonomous ability to mold and manipulate both his own Form and Matter.

רשות לכל אדם נתונה אם רצה להטות עצמו לדרך טובה ולהיות צדיק  
הרשות בידו, ואם רצה להטות עצמו לדרך רעה ולהיות רשע הרשות  
בידו, הוא שכתוב בתורה הן האדם היה כאחד ממנו לדעת טוב ורע,  
כלומר הן מין זה של אדם היה יחיד בעולם ואין מין שני דומה לו בזה  
הענין שיהא הוא מעצמו בדעתו ובמחשבתו יודע הטוב והרע ועושה כל

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<sup>40</sup> Man's intellect allows him to control his impulses and plan for the future. Certain animals have the same ability though not in such an evolved manner. Using that ability for survival purposes only pertains to matter. Using it for enhancing intellectual ability to apprehend abstract concepts and existential questions pertains to Form.

<sup>41</sup> For a further discussion of the Form of Man see SP Chapter 1, MN 1:1 and MT *Yesodei ha-Torah* 4:8.

מה שהוא חפץ ואין מי שיעכב בידו מלעשות הטוב או הרע וכיון שכן הוא  
פן ישלה ידו. (רמב"ם תשובה ה:א)

All men have free choice to follow either the good ways and be righteous, or to follow the bad ways and be wicked. That is written in the Torah, "Behold, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil," i.e. there is in the world a unique species, man, and there is no other with respect to this matter. [Only man] autonomously, in his mind and thoughts, knows the good and bad and acts as he chooses. There is nothing that stops him from doing good or bad. That being the case, "What if he stretches out his hand."<sup>42</sup>

### **God is Good—Existence is Good and Evil is Nonbeing**

In our conception of justice, we say that good acts have good consequences while evil acts cause evil. When we described man's Form, we also said that man has the ability to choose between good and evil. To help us understand these value judgments, good and evil, Rambam introduces the conceptual definition of nonbeing.

You know that he who removes an impediment of motion is to some extent the mover. Thus if one removes the pillar which supports the beam he causes the beam to move, as has been stated by Aristotle in his Physics (VIII., chap. iv.); in this sense we say of him who removed a certain property that he produced the absence of that property, although absence of a property is not an existent thing. Just as we say of him who puts out the light at night that he has produced darkness, so we say of him who destroyed the sight of any being that he produced blindness, although darkness and blindness are negative properties, and require no agent. (MN 3:10)

The idea is that although one can cause nonbeing one cannot create it; it is just there. We can visualize it as superimposing

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<sup>42</sup> Rambam reads this as a positive. God is wishing, so to say, that man choose the 'tree of Life' and thus live "forever". Re the difficulty with "pen" being a negative, see *Torah Shelema* on *Beresbit* 3:22. Translation of Rambam comes courtesy of <http://www.panix.com/~jjbaker/rambam.html> with my edits as I saw fit.

something on nothing. Once the “something” is removed, “nothing” returns. Nonbeing does not need to be created; it is just there. If evil is destruction, an action may cause evil as an accident but there is no created state of evil. One cannot say that evil was created; it is just there once an entity is destroyed. That makes evil a relative term. There is no evil per se. Making something is good; destroying that thing is an act that results in nonbeing or evil.

The proposition has therefore been laid down in the most general terms, “All evils are privations.” Thus for man death is evil: death is his non-existence. Illness, poverty, and ignorance are evils for man: all these are privations of properties. (MN3:10)

It is only once man is alive that death or evil can befall him. Just as death is accidental to life so is evil accidental to good. Thus, when one creates something that is not eternal, one creates evil accidentally as there is now something to destroy. Rambam understands this as the meaning of our description of God as “good”. By definition, God, the ultimate cause of existence, only creates. Since, according to Rambam, material existence created by God is eternal,<sup>43</sup> His actions are the ultimate Good. Evil only occurs when a particular component of the whole of existence ceases to exist.

He only produces being and all being is good. On the other hand, all the evils are privations which can only be attributed to Him in the way we have mentioned. Namely, He creates evil only insofar as He has brought Matter into existence such as it actually is - it is always connected with privation, and is on that account the source of all destruction and all evil. Those beings that do not possess this Matter are not subject to destruction or evil: consequently, the true work of God is all-good, since it is being. The book which enlightened the darkness of the world says therefore, “And God saw everything that He had made, and, behold, it was very good” (*Beresbit* 1:31). (MN 3:10)

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<sup>43</sup> See MN 2:28 and my discussion of it in my article on miracles in *Hakirah* volume 3.

The term *tov me'od*, very good, is a value judgment of the greatest good namely the creation of the universe and existence which are permanent and eternal *a parte post*.

Rambam is introducing us to the idea that evil does not have an independent standing. It is a value judgment that we append to the destruction of something that exists i.e., “good.” Evil cannot exist without good while good does exist without evil—eternal material existence. For a value judgment of what is evil, one can say that evil does not exist in a macro sense; it is only the perception one gets observing the necessary destruction of a particular component of material existence. The more importance we give to a particular component, the greater is the perceived evil.

## **Good and Evil and Man**

How does one translate this concept of good and evil to human actions? What connection does good and bad behavior have with nonbeing?

As we saw earlier, Form in man is unique because it is a potential that has to be developed. The natural state of the human Form, without any further development can be compared to darkness without light—a state of nonbeing. Man in his original natural state is just another species within the animal kingdom with enhanced capabilities that include thought and speech. His humanity, the element that makes him human, is only there in potential awaiting development. Man in his natural state harnesses all his abilities to help him survive in his environment. He uses his capabilities the same way other animals use theirs—for short-term survival of the individual. All this pertains to Matter and has no impact on the Form that makes him human. In his natural state man is narcissistic and self-serving. This is the source of all the evil perpetrated by man on each other.

All the great evils which men cause to each other because of certain purposes, desires, opinions, or beliefs, are likewise due to privation, because they originate in ignorance, which is absence of knowledge. (MN 3:11)

It is only as he develops his unique Form, uses his self-awareness and reflection to seek out the meaning of his existence and

acquires knowledge of God and his own standing in that perspective, that he becomes human.

If men possessed wisdom, which stands in the same relation to the form of man as the sight to the eye, they would not cause any injury to themselves or to others: for the knowledge of truth removes hatred and quarrels, and prevents mutual injuries. (MN 3:11)

Man in his natural undeveloped state is therefore a nonbeing just like darkness is a nonbeing without light and evil is the absence of good. Ignorant and thus selfish man is the source of evil and destruction while self-reflective man is good and promotes existence.

It is acknowledged that a man who does not possess this Form (the nature of which has just been explained) is not human, but a mere animal in human shape and form. Yet such a creature has a faculty to cause harm and injury, a faculty that is not possessed by other animals. For those gifts of intelligence and judgment with which he has been endowed for the purpose of achieving perfection that he has not achieved, are used by him for wicked and mischievous ends; he begets evil things, as though he merely resembled man, or simulated his outward appearance. (MN 1:7)

### **Man's Hierarchical Position in Relation to the Whole of Existence**

Having defined Form and Matter and good and evil, we are ready to address the difficulties that the opinions about Providence discussed so far present to us. As Rambam pointed out, the existence of a will-based<sup>44</sup> Divine Providence is an ontological opinion based on the prophetic writings. It is not an empirical provable fact. However, for it to be an acceptable position it has to stand up to rational scrutiny and not conflict with our observations or other philosophical and theological considerations.<sup>45</sup> The strongest objection to accepting

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<sup>44</sup> As opposed to Aristotle's natural Providence.

<sup>45</sup> For a clear exposition of this important understanding see *A Philosopher's Harvest*, Isaac Franck, Georgetown University Press, 1988 p. 36 based on MN 1:50—"For belief is only possible after the

Divine Providence is the apparent conflict between the theological understanding of a perfect God who is just and good and the human pain and destruction we witness in our daily lives. In a contemporary perspective, how can one justify a Holocaust, Rwanda, Darfur and a few decades ago, Cambodia? How do we justify the destruction brought about in East Asia by the Tsunami? How do we justify the young child who is afflicted with an incurable cancer? How do we understand why a great and righteous man dies during his most productive years? Are we not better off removing God from the equation? Let us compromise a little and say that He created everything but then removed Himself from the mundane task of day-to-day material existence. Rambam will not compromise and stands firm in his opinion that this is against what our prophets intended. “It is the belief of those who turned away from our Law, and said: ‘God hath forsaken the earth’ ” (Ezekiel 9:9) (MN 3:17).

Rambam pinpoints the exact misunderstanding that is at the root of the problem, man’s narcissism.

The origin of the error is to be found in the circumstance that this ignorant man<sup>46</sup> and those like him among the multitude, consider that which exists only with reference to a human individual. For an ignorant man believes that the whole universe only exists for him; as if, there were nothing that exists except him. If, therefore, anything happens to him contrary to his expectation, he at once concludes that the whole universe is evil. (MN 3:12)

As we saw, “good” is a value judgment related to the longevity and permanence of an individual, a species and ultimately, the whole of existence. Although the whole of existence is eternal, it is composed of parts that are transient. In fact, its eternity depends on the continuance of this process of generation and destruction.

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apprehension of a thing; it consists in the conviction that the thing apprehended has its existence beyond the mind [in reality] exactly as it is conceived in the mind. If in addition to this we are convinced that the thing cannot be different in any way from what we believe it to be, and that no reasonable argument can be found for the rejection of the belief or for the admission of any deviation from it, then the belief is true.”

<sup>46</sup> Abu Bakr Muhammad Ibn Zakkariya al Razi died between 923 and 932.

Even the existence of this corporeal element, low as it in reality is, because it is the source of death and all evils, is likewise good for the permanence of the Universe and the continuation of the order of things, so that one thing departs and the other succeeds. (MN 3:10)

Man is just another of the transient components that are responsible for the eternity of the whole. True man is powerful in his immediate environment as he has the ability to influence it and change it:

Man is merely the most noble among the things that are subject to generation, namely in our nether world; I mean to say that he is the noblest that is composed of the elements. Withal his existence is for him a great good and a benefit on the part of God because of the properties with which He has singled him out and perfected him. (MN 3:12)

That is very different from seeing man as the center and purpose of existence where everything exists just for him. In fact, each component of existence, including humankind, is an independent entity intended for its own sake. Of course, they all make up the whole and are complementary to each other. If too many of the components were missing, the whole would take on a different shape. That does not, however, indicate that one component is more important than the other is.

I consider therefore the following opinion as most correct according to the teaching of the Law, and best in accordance with the results of philosophy; namely, that the Universe does not exist for man's sake, but that each being exists for its own sake, and not because of some other thing. (MN 3:13)

With this preamble, Rambam is now ready to address the issue of justice. When looking at what we consider evil, we classify this into three groups: Evil or bad things that happen as a result of nature; Evil done by man to each other; Evil we cause to ourselves by our own actions. For ease of reference, I will call them Evil 1, 2 and 3.

## The Evils that Befall Us as a Result of Nature—Evil 1

This category covers all occurrences that result from generation and destruction that is inherent and necessary for long-term material existence. That includes illnesses brought about by genetic defects, natural events such as earthquakes and the resultant destruction, storms, etc...

We have already shown that, in accordance with the divine wisdom, coming-to-be can only take place through passing away, and without the passing away of the individual members of the species the species themselves would not exist permanently. (MN 3:12)

Thus in a macro perspective these tragedies, and they are tragedies for the individual who experiences them, are ultimately part of what makes existence possible.<sup>47</sup> The individual is not responsible for the suffering he experiences; it is just the inevitable sacrifice of the individual for the good of the whole.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Rambam clearly struggles with this seemingly cold rationale. He ends this section with what I read as a clearly defensive statement. “You will, nevertheless, find that the evils of the above kind which befall man are very few and rare. You find countries that have not been flooded or burned for thousands of years. There are thousands of men in perfect health, deformed individuals are a strange and exceptional occurrence, or say few in number if you object to the term exceptional,—they are not one-hundredth, not even one-thousandth part of those that are perfectly normal.”

<sup>48</sup> In a letter to his pupil R. Yosef, Rambam writes about the death of his daughter. (It is not clear if she was his daughter or a family member.) He tells him that the affairs of man as a species are “good”. Not that it is the ultimate “good” but the best under the circumstances. There is no choice but to look at the existence of the species and ignore the things that happen to individuals. (*Letters*, Shilat Edition p. 262—brought to my attention by R. B.Z. Buchman).

## **Evil Done By Man to Each Other—Evil 2**

As discussed earlier, man in his natural state uses his mental capabilities only to promote his physical survival. Without actualizing his Form by using his capacity for self-awareness to develop a moral and ethical code of behavior, his predatory instinct reigns freely. Man's intended role as part of the whole of existence is to use his freedom of choice constructively. However, freedom of choice inherently means that he can choose to be destructive. Just like natural disasters are the result of their nature so too is man's choice to destroy in his quest for self-preservation. True, the individual who is caught up in the process, the innocent victim who is killed during a war for example, cannot escape. However, it is relatively rare and is the inevitable price paid to allow for man's contribution for the long-term survival of the whole. The act may be evil but the underlying quality that is the cause of it is not. Freedom of choice is a good thing that by its own nature has a destructive component.

The second class of evils comprises such evils as people cause to each other, such as tyrannical domination of some of them over others. These evils are more numerous than those belonging to the first kind are and the reasons for that are numerous and known. They likewise originate in us, though the sufferer himself cannot avert them. This kind of evil is nevertheless not widespread in any city existing anywhere in the whole world. It is of rare occurrence that a man plans to kill his neighbor or to rob him of his property by night. Many persons are, however, afflicted with this kind of evil in great wars: but these are not frequent, if the total of the inhabited part of the earth is taken into consideration. (MN 3:12)

Looking at these two types of misfortune, although tragic for the individual caught up in them, they are seen as inevitable and just in the sense that they are necessary consequences of the human condition. Rambam will address the perspective of the individual a little further in our discussion.

## **Evil Caused to Us by Our Own Actions—Evil 3**

To serve his survival instincts, man has urges that are activated as needed for his protection, his quest for sustenance and control of his

environment. There are no natural limitations on these urges as they are governed by man's freedom of will. Man's natural instinct is to let those urges run freely and the more acquisitions, the more he can satisfy his appetites in all areas, the more man sees himself as successful. This unbridled ambition is the cause of all the evil committed by man to each other but even more importantly to himself. The cause of many illnesses is the lack of control on the various appetites, from eating to all other indulgences. The urge for acquisitions is the cause of many risks man takes with his life and limb. Being aware of this and controlling the appetites—limiting them to what they are intended for—would eliminate this type of evil

The virtuous and wise, however, see and comprehend the wisdom of God displayed in the Universe. Thus, David says, “All the paths of the Lord are mercy and truth unto such as keep His covenant and His testimonies” (Ps. 25:10). For those who keep the nature of that which exists and the commandments of the Law and know their purpose,<sup>49</sup> see clearly the mercy and true reality of the whole; they seek, therefore, that which the Creator intended to be the aim of man—apprehension. Forced by the claims of the body, they seek also that which is necessary for the preservation of the body, “bread to eat and garment to clothe,” and this is very little; but they seek nothing superfluous: with very slight exertion, man can obtain it, so long as he is contented with that which is indispensable. All the difficulties and troubles we meet in this respect are due to the desire for superfluous things: when we seek unnecessary things, we have difficulty even in finding that which is indispensable. For the more, we desire to have that which is superfluous, the more we meet with difficulties; our strength and possessions are spent in unnecessary things, and are wanting when required for that which is necessary. (MN 3:12)

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<sup>49</sup> Rav Kafih translates *vetachlitam* as referring to the Laws of the Torah only. In chapter 13 Rambam tells us that we cannot know the reason for existence other than the will of God. In that context, I believe R. Kafih is correct. Michael Schwartz translated *tachlit shneihem* and Pines translated “the purpose of both” which is contradictory to chapter 13. I have therefore left Friedlander's translation which though ambiguous becomes less so if one removes the comma.

In addition, one of the most common injustices man perceives in his existence is how much more another person has compared to him. When valuing the rewards that the righteous lack and seeing this deficiency as a punishment when compared to what the wicked have, questions about God's justice crop up. It is only when a proper perspective is developed, i.e., the realization that the acquisitions of the wicked individual do not add to his essence as man, that God's justice is appreciated.

It is no inequity or injustice that one has many bags of finest myrrh and garments embroidered with gold, while another has not those things, which are not necessary for our maintenance; he who has them has not thereby gained an increment in his substance, but has only obtained something illusory or deceptive. The other, who lacks the superfluities of life, is not necessarily deficient. (MN 3:12)

The first steps man has to take in developing his Form, his ability to observe himself, is to understand that the purpose of his urges is the survival of the individual and the species. Doing that changes his value system. He no longer sees unbridled appetites and its satisfaction as reward.

In these two ways [recognition of what is absolutely necessary and the resulting value judgment] you will see the mercy of God toward His creatures, how He has provided that which is required, in proper proportions, and treated all individual beings of the same species with perfect equality. In accordance with this correct reflection the Master of those who know says, "All his ways are judgment" (Deut. 32: 4). And David likewise says: "All the paths of the Lord are mercy and truth" (Ps. 25:10). He also says expressly "The Lord is good to all; and his tender mercies are over all his works" (*ibid.* 145: 9). For it is an act of great and perfect goodness that He gave us existence: and the creation of the governing faculty in the living beings is a proof of His mercy towards them, as has been shown by us.

It is important to note that Rambam interprets the words *בְּרִיתוֹ*, His covenant—in the verse in *Tehillim* 25:10—as "nature of that which exists," in other words, those who understand their environment and can therefore correctly assess what is needed. These

people understand the mercy<sup>50</sup> and truth in reality. The other important point is that the purpose of the commandments of the Law is to help set limits and control our natural urges. It is the combination of these two types of knowledge that eliminate this kind of evil. Both of these intellectual developments, understanding the mechanics of the universe and the commandments of the Law, in their practical sense as opposed to their more philosophical dimension,<sup>51</sup> are tools that man possesses to regulate his existence and minimize evil. It is man's nonbeing, his election not to use his Form and become the being he was meant to be, man, that results in destruction. That is mercy and justice. It is the justice referred to in the verse:

ד הַצּוֹר תְּמִים פְּעָלוֹ, כִּי כָל-דַּרְכָּיו מִשְׁפָּט: אֵל אֱמוּנָה נֶאֱיֶן עָנֹל, צַדִּיק וְיֵשֶׁר  
הוּא.

4 The Rock, His work is perfect; for all His ways are justice; a God of faithfulness and without iniquity, just and right is He.

Rambam uses the same verse in his presentation of the axiom that declares God just.

### **Developing one's Divine Providence**

As we have seen, it is man developing his Form, his unique ability for self-observation and control, which is the key to his survival without evil. As the notion of Divine Providence explains how the consequences of man's actions are just, it therefore follows that its magnitude will depend on the degree man has actualized his Form. The more man has developed his Form, his intellect, the control it exercises over his urges and directs his actions, the more Divine Providence he acquires.

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<sup>50</sup> I left the translation of the word *hesed* as mercy. The meaning is undeserved favor. It is man's availability of choice, his advanced intellectual capabilities that are given to him at birth.

<sup>51</sup> *Mitzvot*, in addition to promoting discipline, also have a philosophical dimension. They remind us to think by questioning why we are doing them, about Who commanded them.

Hence it follows, in accordance with what I have mentioned in the preceding chapter, that any human individual that has obtained, on account of both his physical predisposition and his training, a greater portion of this overflow [human intellect]<sup>52</sup> than others, the greater must also be the effect of Providence upon him. For the action of Divine Providence is proportional to the endowment of intellect, as has been mentioned above. Accordingly, Divine Providence does not watch in an equal manner over all the individuals of the human species, but providence is graded as their human perfection is graded. (MN 3:18)

A man who uses his freedom of choice to develop his intellect does not self-destruct. The more he develops his intellect the more he is in control of his actions. Evil 3 is addressed leaving us with the other two types of evil, natural disasters and those perpetrated by man on each other. True tragedies caused by hereditary or genetic illnesses cannot be avoided. Perfected individuals can still be caught up in a Tsunami or a war. However, it is not totally one-sided and unavoidable; the victim had to decide to be there when the disaster occurred.

It may be by mere chance that a ship goes down with all her contents, as in the above-mentioned instance, or the roof of a house falls upon those within. The fact that the people in the ship went on board and that the people in the house were sitting in it is according to our opinion, not due to chance. It is due to the will of God, and is in accordance with the deserts of those people and the justice of His judgments, the rule of which our mind is incapable of understanding. (MN 3:17)

The human being who was caught up in that disaster, however, did so because of his free will. The decision to be present when the tragedy occurred was his own because God wanted man to have freedom of choice. A decision based on choice is subject to

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<sup>52</sup> Divine overflow which is what Rambam refers to here is discussed at length in MN 2:12. The idea is that all existence flows from God's wisdom and manifests itself through the laws of nature. These laws are referred to in their abstract form as the Active Intellect. The way man acquires knowledge is by deciphering with his mind the overflow of information that emanates from the Active Intellect.

judgment and must be seen as just even if we have difficulties understanding it. Rambam has taken the general statement that we began with, “but we are ignorant of the various modes of deserts”, and relegated it to this specific case and other similar ones. As we will see there is a rational reason why we are incapable of understanding the justice of this situation.<sup>53</sup>

### **The Different Stages of Divine Providence**

I believe that the key to Rambam’s Divine Providence is gradation. The same Form that differentiates man from the rest of the animal kingdom, his ability for independent reflective thought, is also used, at its most basic level, for his physical survival. At this level, it is seen as an undeveloped potential undifferentiated from the specific ability of other species within the animal kingdom. It is seen as just a more evolved instinct which has not yet taken on the aspects of Form; those abilities at this stage pertain to Matter. As a human develops and actualizes his Form, becomes more self-reflective, he modulates his instincts. His intellect gradually takes control and he starts acting beyond the moment. As he develops, his horizons expand, his outlook is longer term and his actions are geared to that broader vision. As he reaches higher levels of understanding, as he can see further into the future, his actions are also geared to that long-term outlook. This intellectual growth also broadens man’s goals beyond the selfish and narcissistic. As he grows intellectually and develops a broad view of existence, an understanding of how God is running

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<sup>53</sup> However, in all occurrences where man is not involved Rambam follows Aristotle and sees pure chance. “But I agree with Aristotle as regards all other living beings, and à fortiori as regards plants and all other earthly creatures. For I do not believe that it is through the interference of Divine Providence that a certain leaf drops [from a tree], nor do I hold that when a certain spider catches a certain fly, that this is the direct result of a special decree and will of God in that moment. It is not by a particular Divine decree that the spittle of a certain person moved, fell on a certain gnat in a certain place, and killed it; nor is it by the direct will of God that a certain fish catches and swallows a certain worm on the surface of the water. In all these cases the action is, according to my opinion, entirely due to chance, as taught by Aristotle” (MN3:17).

things, his goals change. He now wants to partake in God's work and help in improving humanity both in the present and into future generations. The consequences of his action can no longer be judged in the short term. They are viewed in the context of his long-term vision and how successful he was in attaining those goals. This vision of the long term is acquired by the fully developed person by connecting with the Active Intellect<sup>54</sup>—the Divine Overflow that man can tap into. The Active Intellect can also be described as the Form of the Universe. It is the repository of all the ideas and concepts that underlie existence. It is similar to Form as it relates to Matter.

In accordance with this speculation it follows necessarily that His providence, that watches over the prophets is very great and proportionate to their degree in prophecy and that His providence that watches over excellent and righteous men is proportionate to their excellence and righteousness. (MN 3:18)

The idea that men can prophesize is intimately linked with the idea of Divine Providence. When describing the different types of “angels” or concepts that underlie existence, Rambam lists the *Ishim* as the lowest level that can be understood by man.

ומעלה עשירית, היא מעלת הצורה שנקראת אישים, והם המלאכים שמדברים עם הנביאים ונראים להם במראה הנבואה; לפיכך נקראו אישים, שמעלתם קרובה ממעלת דעת האדם.

The tenth level is the Form that is called *Ishim*. They are the angels that talk to the prophets and are seen by them in their prophetic visions. Their name *Ishim* (men or individuals) indicates

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<sup>54</sup> See note 52 above for a definition. For further reading on the Active Intellect and how to understand it in contemporary philosophical thinking see Philip Merlan, *Monophysicism, Mysticism and Metaconsciousness, Knowledge and the Sacred* by Seyyed Hossein Nasr. For a presentation of Maimonides and Gersonides on this issue see, Feldman, Seymour “Gersonides on the Possibility of Conjunction with the Agent Intellect” *AJS Review* 3 (1978): 99-120. (My thanks to Dr. Alan Brill for the references).

that their state is close to the state of man's thoughts. (*Hilkhot Yesodei ha-Torah* 2:7)

When describing how a prophet acquires his capacity to see into the future, the last step is:

ובעת שתנוח עליו הרוח--תתערב נפשו במעלת המלאכים הנקראים  
אישים, וייהפך לאיש אחר, ויבין בדעתו שאינו כמות שהיה, אלא  
שנתעלה על מעלת שאר בני אדם החכמים

When the spirit lands on him (the person that has readied himself for prophecy), his soul mixes with the quality of the angel called *Ishim*, he becomes another person, knowing in his mind that he has changed, and has been elevated above the quality of the other wise people. (*Hilkhot Yesodei ha-Torah* 7:1).

In MN 2:4 Rambam writes:

The tenth Intelligence is the Active Intellect. The existence of the latter is proved by the transition of our intellect from a state of potentiality to that of actuality, and by the same transition in the case of the forms of all transient beings.

Thus, *Ishim* is identical with the Active Intellect and a prophet is a person that has developed his Form to the point that he is intimate with it. It is this process of man developing his Form, and the stage he is at every given moment that reflects on how he behaves and the goals he sets for his actions. This translates into Divine Providence. A human observer cannot evaluate properly what impelled another person to decide upon an action which resulted in a consequence. Was it a correct assessment resulting from his connection with the Divine Overflow or an instinctive reaction? Nor is the individual who acts in good faith and to the best of his faculties, according to his understanding of what is correct, always sure, that he is not mistaken. That is why we accept that everything operates according to justice "the rule of which our mind is incapable of understanding." (MN 3:17).

## **Divine Providence – Goals, Hopes and Fears**

The paradigm of people who have tapped into Divine Providence and lived their lives fully in accordance with their apprehension are

Avraham, Yitzhak, Ya'akov and Moshe (Yehoshua is also included in one quote). Their goals were broad in the sense that they influenced as many as they could during their lifetime. They were also acting with a long-term outlook in the sense that they were creating a nation that has as its goal the full development of the human intellect. It also has as its mission the spreading of that goal across humanity.

Consider how the action of Divine Providence is described in reference to every incident in the lives of the patriarchs, in their various activities and even in their acquisition of property and what they were promised in consequence of providence accompanying them. (MN3:18)

I think these four reached that high degree of perfection in their relation to God, and enjoyed the continual presence of Divine Providence, even in their endeavors to increase their property, feeding the flock, toiling in the field, or managing the house, only because in all these things their end and aim was to approach God as much as possible. It was the chief aim of their whole life to create a people that should know and worship God. (MN 3:51)

As Divine Providence is something a man has to acquire through his intellect, it is inevitable that some doubt will enter into his mind. The more he grows and the broader his outlook, the less likely he is to witness the results of his actions in his lifetime. That explains the repetitive reassurances given to the Patriarchs, Moshe and other prophets and leaders in Tanakh. It also explains the constant fear of failure they had starting with Avraham questioning his barrenness. Rambam in his introduction to *Perush ha-Mishnah* addresses one of those instances:

אבל מה שפחד יעקב אחרי שהבטיחו ה' בטוב באמרו לו והנה אנכי עמך וכו', ומצאנו שפחד פן יספה שנ' ויירא יעקב מאד וכו', ואמרו חכמים בזה שפחד מחטא חמור שיתחייב עליו השמדה, והוא אמרם קסבר שמא יגרום החטא, משמע מזה שאפשר שיבטיח ה' טובה ויכריעו העונות ולא יתקיים אותו הטוב. דע שאין זאת אלא במה שבין ה' לנביא. (הקדמת הרמב"ם למשנה)

Having argued that a prophecy that promises good outcomes must be fulfilled, the question arises as to why Ya'akov was fearful when God promised him that good things would befall him. Rambam explains that only prophecies that require the prophet to tell

others are infallible. A prophet that acts based upon a personal vision is not immune to doubt.

This also explains the despair Moshe showed at the Golden Calf episode when God threatened the destruction of the Jewish people.

יב לְמָה יֹאמְרוּ מִצְרַיִם לֵאמֹר, בְּרָעָה הוֹצִיאָם לְהַרְגֵם אֶתְּם בְּהָרִים, וְלִכְלֹתָם, מֵעַל פְּנֵי הָאָדָמָה; שׁוּב מִחֲרוֹן אַפְּךָ, וְהִנָּחֵם עַל-הָרָעָה לַעֲמֹךְ. יג זְכוֹר לְאַבְרָהָם לְיִצְחָק וּלְיִשְׂרָאֵל עֲבָדֶיךָ, אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּעְתָּ לָהֶם בְּךָ, וַתִּדְבַר אֱלֹהִים, אַרְבָּה אֶת-זַרְעֲכֶם כְּכּוֹכְבֵי הַשָּׁמַיִם; וְכָל-הָאָרֶץ הַזֹּאת אֲשֶׁר אָמַרְתִּי, אֶתְּוֹ לְזַרְעֲכֶם, וְנָחֳלוּ, לָעַלְמִים.

**12** Wherefore should the Egyptians speak, saying: For evil did He bring them forth, to slay them in the mountains, and to consume them from the face of the earth? Turn from Thy fierce wrath, and repent of this evil against Thy people. **13** Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, Thy servants, to whom Thou didst swear by Thine own self, and said unto them: I will multiply your seed as the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have spoken of will I give unto your seed, and they shall inherit it for ever.

The destruction of the people would prove him mistaken as well as the Patriarchs. It would show that their understanding and actions were flawed, as they did not have the desired outcome. That is why they needed constant reinforcement to help alleviate their self-doubt.<sup>55</sup>

Thus God said to Abraham, “I am thy shield” (Gen. 15:1); to Isaac, “I will be with thee, and I will bless thee” (*ibid.* 26:3); to Jacob, “I am with thee, and will keep thee” (*ibid.* 28:15); to [Moses] the chief of the Prophets, “Certainly I will be with thee, and this shall be a token unto thee” (Exodus 3:12); to Joshua, “As I was with Moses, so I shall be with thee.” (Josh. 1:5) (MN 3:18)

<sup>55</sup> In verse 13 Moshe invokes the memory of the patriarchs as if to say, if you destroy the people, their actions will be questioned. In our daily prayers and especially during the High Holy Days, that theme is recurrent. It gives a different meaning to “*Zchut Avot*”.

## **Conclusion—Divine Providence and the Conquest of Death**

We must differentiate between Providence (*Hanebagab*) which is how the world is run according to nature and Divine Providence (*Hashgabah*) which is available only to humankind. Providence or nature is a built-in mechanism that the universe has for its survival. As long as the whole survives, what happens to individual components within is irrelevant and is purely utilitarian. One cannot discern, much less ascribe, any Divine Justice or for that matter, any direct Divine involvement. Divine Providence however is reserved for man and is a system where justice prevails. It is a function of man's special quality: his ability to think using his mind. The mind or intellect in its "hyleic" or original state is no more than another component of man's makeup necessary for his survival in his environment. Man that remains in that state and does not develop further is no different from all other beings in the universe. He is subject to the laws of chance as an individual and the laws of nature or Providence as a species. Man however has the ability to develop his intellect to the point where he connects with the Active Intellect, the Form of existence. He can then tailor his actions to be consistent with what he has apprehended about how things should develop. The apprehension itself does not suffice; action that is consistent with that apprehension is the key.

...that the perfection, in which man can truly glory, is attained by him when he has acquired—as far as this is possible for man—the knowledge of God, the knowledge of His Providence, and of the manner in which it influences His creatures in their production and continued existence. Having acquired this knowledge he will then be determined always to seek loving-kindness, judgment, and righteousness, and thus to imitate the ways of God. (MN 3:54)

Very few reach the level where they can tailor their actions in this way. Even those who do reach certain levels of intimacy with the divine, it is at the moments of distraction, when they act in a unthinking way, that they fall back under the normal day-to-day system of Providence. That system, the day-to-day reality of most of humankind, is governed by chance. Although we see that sometimes those we consider as perfected people suffer and we are baffled, we

can attribute it to our lack of understanding and knowledge of that person's true state of mind. That is only known to God and to a certain extent by the individual himself. It is because we understand that the perfect man's actions, the actions of the patriarchs for example, have by definition a "good" outcome that we can accept that a "man in progress" is governed by justice. We understand the gradation that is there in the different stages of development and how it is responsible for the various outcomes. We struggle to explain every seeming injustice but we ultimately know it is based on justice.<sup>56</sup> However, when people act while they are in an elevated state no "bad" can befall them, as their actions will inevitably lead to "good" or existence. They are, after all, intimate with eternity and acting that way. Even their death is not considered death—"This kind of death, which in truth is deliverance from death, has been ascribed by our Sages to none but to Moses, Aaron, and Miriam" (MN 3:51). ❧

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<sup>56</sup> In his letter to the sages of Montpellier, Rambam writes: ואל יאמר אדם ייסורים לנחול דבר והרי רבים עשו כן ולא הצליחו, אין זה ראייה, כי היה להם עוון הגורם, או אדם היאך הם בזה שהוא טוב מזה. כללו של דבר, אין דעתנו משגת דיני הבורא ית' בבני העולם ובעולם הבא.

Many argue that Rambam is contradicting himself as he dismissed earlier in MN the concept of "love sufferings." In the context, however, it must be seen as a concession to those who are not used to philosophical thinking. We know that there is justice by inference although the detailed explanation may be seen as "incongruous."