

Shmuel Reichman Inspiration- Think. Feel. Grow.

The "Nature" of Miracles

A Weekly Dvar Torah on the Parsha



1. What's Really Going On?

Imagine you meet someone, and immediately notice something peculiar: he is incessantly clapping his hands. The next day, you realize that once again, he is constantly clapping his hands. As this pattern continues for several weeks, you realize that he must have some kind of biological disorder, forcing him to act this way. You begin to get used to the strange behavior, accepting this boy's nature. One day, as per usual, you see him clapping his hands. Suddenly, the unexplainable happens: the boy stops clapping his hands, looks right, then left, smiles to himself, waves at you, and then goes back to clapping his hands again. Your first response is absolute shock; a moment later, you begin to realize the fascinating truth: this boy doesn't have a disorder, and he isn't being forced to clap his hands. Every moment, he chooses to clap his hands. You just witnessed a brief moment where he chose not to clap his hands. The clapping has always been fully in his control. This connects to a very profound idea developed in this week's parsha.



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2. The Miraculous and the Natural

We are complicated beings, living in an even more complex world. Many people become overwhelmed by the intricacies of life, and would rather live within the

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confines of simplicity than attempt to navigate the weaving path towards the truth. Yet, those driven by imagination, curiosity, and a higher will, venture to embrace the complexities of this world, seeing the true beauty behind the nuance and sophistication of the Torah and our universe. Those striving for the truth constantly question the nature of the world we live in.

In parshas Va'era, Hashem reveals Himself to the world through miracles and makkos. The laws of nature are broken, the impossible becomes possible, the unfathomable, fathomable. Yet, to fully appreciate and understand the meaning of a miracle, we must first attempt to understand nature itself.

The concept of nature is a wondrous and enigmatic idea. After all, what do we mean when we refer to the natural? Naturally, what goes up tends to come back down. Nature also causes rain storms, hurricanes, tornadoes, and appears to be responsible for disease and illness. We tend to give nature credit for most of what happens in this world. Yet, any thoughtful Jew should be troubled by the concept of nature. If Hashem created this world, then how are we supposed to approach nature? Is nature something independent from Hashem? To answer these questions, let us take a few steps back, and begin with the fundamental starting point.

3. Three Forms of Disbelief in Hashem

At the end of parshas Boh, the Ramban (Ramban Al Ha'Torah- Boh 13:16) famously mentions three basic categories of people who don't believe in Hashem. The first is one who doesn't believe in Hashem at all. He believes that the world has always existed, without any creator whatsoever. After all, when you look around, do you see Hashem? You can't see, hear, touch, smell, or taste Him, so how are you supposed to know that He exists? Furthermore, how can something come from nothing? Such questions have caused many to reject the existence of Hashem altogether.

However, many others are willing to accept Hashem's existence. After all, since this world is so sophisticated and beautiful, there must have been a creator. Just spend a few days studying human biology, and you will marvel in the wonder and brilliance of a single human being. The second category of people claim that once Hashem created the world, He left. As a result, Hashem is unaware of anything happening in this world. This is referred to as the watchmaker theory: once a watchmaker creates a watch, it runs completely on its own. Now, there are a number of reasons why people would feel abandoned: First of all, like with the previous group, we don't see Hashem in a revealed manner. It's only logical that if Hashem is an all-powerful and perfect being, then He is also too important to deal with the finite and limited world that we inhabit. Furthermore, when you look around the world, you see so much pain, suffering, blood shed, and sickness. Even worse, these terrible things often plague tzaddikim, while so many risha'im seem to live such peaceful and pleasant lives! Why would Hashem allow this to happen if He were running the world?

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Others mistakenly think Hashem is like most human beings, who start a project, eventually get tired of it, and move on to something else. They claim that Hashem must have therefore moved on to some other project, leaving us alone in the universe. These are just a few of the reasons that this second group of people claim that Hashem has left our world to the random and coincidental occurrences of nature.

Finally, the third group claims that Hashem didn't leave this world, but is rather limited and weak, unable to intervene with nature. He knows what's happening in this world, but remains passive. This group claims that Hashem might have been able to create the world, but He can't control it. Thus, they question Hashem as all powerful being.

4. Yetzias Mitzrayim: Undermining All Three

The Ramban continues to explain that Yetzias Metzrayim negated all three of these groups. By performing the ten makkos, kriyas yam suf, and redeeming Klal Yisrael, Hashem shattered each mistaken paradigm, all at once. Beyond revealing the fact that He exists, knows what's going on in this world, and is capable of intervening, He also revealed his all-encompassing power. Through the miraculous events of yetzias Mitzrayim, Hashem showed His control over, and ability to uproot, the laws of nature. Nevertheless, the question then becomes: what is nature?

5. What is Nature?

If you take a moment to introspect, you will find that almost everything in this world involves a cause and effect relationship. The world seems to abide by certain rules, with very few exceptions. Why does the sun rise every morning? Why do seeds grow when you plant them, give them water, and provide sunshine? Why does time always move forward? How does a complex human body maintain homeostasis? How does such an intricate planet maintain homeostasis? When you take a moment to ponder these questions, you can't help but wonder: "What is causing all this order?" Of course, the answer must be: nature. So this brings us back to our original question: what is nature?

6. Three Forms of Belief in Hashem

R' Eliyahu Dessler explains that even those who believe in Hashem have different ways of understanding nature. These differences in understanding correlate to three distinct levels of belief.

A) Hashem Created Nature

The first level pertains to those who completely believe in Hashem's existence, but also believe in a concept called nature. While Hashem may have created nature, it is a self-governing, independent entity that maintains this world. Hashem is a transcendent being, and exists beyond this world, while nature is the mechanism that governs the physical world. Typically, such a person believes that if he abides by the rules of cause and effect and works hard, he will be successful in life. Of course, he still realizes that Hashem is the ultimate power and can intervene with nature at any point in time. He will therefore daven to Hashem with tremendous kavanah: "Please don't interfere and mess up my plans". This person thinks that things will run naturally unless Hashem decides to interfere. R' Dessler places this as the lowest of the three levels.

B) Hashem Created and Controls Nature

The second level includes the person who thinks that Hashem causes everything in this world to occur. Like a person writing with a pen, Hashem has complete control over nature, and uses it like a tool. This results in a much greater appreciation of Hashem's presence in the world, as everything that happens in your life is now coming from Hashem. Accordingly, the experiences in your life will now be filled with spiritual relevance, and "hashgacha" will take a forefront position in your vernacular. Yet, this person still views nature as something separate from Hashem, merely used as a tool. One must ask: Why does Hashem need a tool? You only need tools when you can't accomplish the task yourself. You only need a pen because yourself finger itself can't write. So is Hashem Himself limited, in that he needed to create a tool called nature?

C) Nature Itself is the Constant Will of Hashem

The third level, the highest level, is one that requires a developed understanding of Hashem and His relationship with this world. One who attains this level understands that nature is simply an illusion, a mask for Hashem's will. In fact, nature does not exist as an independent identity at all. What we call nature is actually the actualization of Hashem's will. Hashem is complete oneness, and therefore nature isn't separate from Hashem at all. Rather, nature is just a term we use to identify the events of cause and effect we witness each day. Just like thoughts originate in your mind, and come into fruition through action, Hashem constantly wills everything into existence, and everything in this world manifests as a result. Thus, this world is really a reflection of a much higher reality. This third level is the one presented by Ramban in the same passage we mentioned earlier.

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He explains that the open miracles during yetzias Mitzrayim revealed to the world that nature itself is really a hidden miracle. In other words, there is no fundamental difference between the amazing miracles and wonders Hashem performed, whereby He uprooted all the laws of nature, and the extraordinary wonders Hashem performs every single day. There is no template or natural system called nature. Rather, Hashem wills the same wonders into existence every second, to make it appear as if there is an independent system in place. We call these constant miracles: nature. In essence, the only difference between open miracles and nature is the frequency. The miracles of yetzias Mitzrayim only occurred once in history, while the miracles of nature occur every second. Just like the boy from our opening story, whose momentary transition revealed that what appeared to be his nature was actually his constant will, the same is true about nature itself. Let's be inspired to see past the mask of nature, to find Hashem in every aspect of our lives, and to recognize the miraculous within the natural.