

Meshech Chochmah Parshas Bechukosai

Miracles and Nature

אם בְּחֻקֹתַי תֵּלְכוּ... וְנָתַתִּי גֶשְׁמֵיכֶם בְּעֵתָם

If you will follow My decrees... I will provide your rains in their time (26:3-4)

Our parsha opens with the Torah's promises of blessings if the Jewish people fulfil its mitzvos. We note that the Torah does not say that if we fulfil the mitzvos then Hashem will perform miracles for us. Rather, the blessings are expressed within the bounds of nature, such as rains in their time.

This teaches us a profound lesson regarding the way in which Hashem wishes to bestow His blessing on the world. Although there are times when Hashem has performed miracles for the Jewish people, these do not represent the ideal way that He wishes to run the world. Rather, it is the rules of nature, ordained by Hashem, that contain within them the capacity to provide for the needs of all life-forms. If the Jewish people follow the Torah, then the medium of nature will be maximized to produce plenty and fulfil all their needs.

The Role of Miracles

A direct corollary of this idea is the crucial recognition that the laws of nature are not programmed in advance to produce a set amount depending on natural input alone. Rather they are constantly being governed by Divine supervision in response to the spiritual level of the Jewish people, based on which Hashem will decide how much blessing to bestow within those laws. Thus, the midrash states¹ that in the generation of R' Shimon ben Shatach – one in which people were extremely righteous – the rains fell consistently on Friday nights, a time when people are at home and no inconvenience was caused by the rain. Moreover, the grain produced by that rain was unusually large, to the extent that the sages preserved specimens of the wheat and barley kernels in order to demonstrate to future generations that the quality of the agricultural yield is dependent upon the level of mitzvah adherence and observance.

¹ Toras Kohanim Bechukosai chap. 1.

This recognition can sometimes be obscured by the regularity of nature's laws. It is for this reason Hashem occasionally performs miracles, in order to emphasize that He is very much present in the running of the world. However, those miracles do not represent an ideal form of interaction in themselves. Rather, their primary goal is to restore our awareness of Hashem's involvement through the laws of nature.

Between Hallel Hagadol and Ashrei

This idea will illuminate for us two statements of Chazal regarding different forms of praising Hashem. In one place,² the Gemara states that whoever says Ashrei every day is assured of a place in the World to Come. Elsewhere,³ the Gemara states that one who says Hallel Hagadol⁴ every day is considered a blasphemer. What is behind these two such different responses to those praises?

The Meshech Chochmah explains that Hallel Hagadol praises Hashem for the open miracles which He has performed for us, such as smiting the Egyptian firstborn and splitting the Red Sea. Although there are occasions when it is appropriate to praise Hashem for these miracles, if one does so every day, he is thereby indicating that Hashem should be recognized only as the One behind miracles, but not behind the regular laws of nature. This attitude is objectionable in the extreme, and ultimately constitutes a form of blasphemy.

In contrast to this, the Gemara notes that Ashrei has two qualities:

1. It follows the order of the *alef beis*.
2. It contains the pasuk פוּתַח אֶת יָדְךָ וּמְשֻׁבֵּיעַ לְכֹל חַי רִצּוֹן – *You open Your hand and satisfy the desire of every living thing.*

The Meshech Chochmah explains that it specifically the combinations of these two things which makes the daily recitation of Ashrei so praiseworthy. The following of the order of *alef beis* corresponds to the laws of nature, which take

² Berachos 4b.

³ Shabbos 118b.

⁴ Tehillim chap. 136.

the form of the ordered steps of the various cycles and processes.⁵ The point of Ashrei is that is *through these very processes* that Hashem “Opens His hand and satisfies the desire of every living thing.”

Moreover, from a certain point of view, the laws of nature are greater cause for praise than open miracles. The latter are tailored to a certain group at a certain time, such as providing manna for the Bnei Yisrael during their sojourn in the wilderness,⁶ while the former represent the organization of a system that can provide for the needs of the entire world on an ongoing basis.

The Kindnesses of the Fathers

וְזָכַרְתִּי אֶת בְּרִיתִי יַעֲקֹב וְאֶת בְּרִיתִי יִצְחָק וְאֶת בְּרִיתִי אַבְרָהָם אֶזְכֹּר

I will remember My covenant with Yaakov and also My covenant with Yitzchak, and also My covenant with Avraham I will remember (26:42)

The first berachah of the Shemoneh Esrei ends by us saying:

וזכר חסדי אבות ומביא גואל לבני בניהם למען שמו באהבה

[Hashem] remembers the kindnesses of the fathers, and brings the redeemer to their descendant for the sake of His Name, with love.

The simple meaning of these words is that Hashem remembers the acts of kindness performed by our forefathers, and in that merit will bring the

⁵ It is for this reason the bracha of “Yotzer Ohr” which precedes the morning Shema, in which we praise Hashem over the natural world, contains a section which follows the *alef beis* (א-ל ברוך) during the week and א-ל אדון on Shabbos).

⁶ The Meshech Chochmah explains that it is with regard to miracles such as these the final pasuk of Hallel Hagadol states “נָתַן לָחֶם לְכֹל בְּשָׂר׃ – He *gives* food to all flesh.” In these miraculous instances, the food is given to the beneficiaries of the miracle as a finished product. In contrast, when providing through the laws of nature, Hashem gives us the wherewithal to produce food, as we say in the first beracha of *birkas hamazon*: “וּמְכִין מִזֶּן לְכֹל בְּרִיּוֹתָיו׃ – and *prepares* sustenance for all His creations.” In this regard, the Meshech Chochmah notes that Rashi, in his comments to the Gemara regarding Ashrei, writes, “And it contains the praise of [Hashem] *preparing* food for all living things.”

redemption for their descendants. In an alternative approach, The Meshech Chochmah offers a most fascinating interpretation of these concluding words.⁷

It is nature of one who bestows kindness on another that he continues to maintain an interest in that person's wellbeing, performing additional subsequent acts of kindness, so that his initial kindness not be in vein. In this regard, too, we say that Hashem "remembers the kindnesses of the fathers," i.e. *the kindnesses that He bestowed upon the fathers*, and thus, will continually protect and ultimately redeem their descendants so that those initial kindnesses will not be for naught.

May we merit to see the fulfilment of this blessing speedily in our days!

חזק חזק ונתחזק

⁷ In presenting the background to this alternative explanation, the Meshech Chochmah refers to Tosafos in Shabbos 55a (s.v. *u'Shmuel*), discussing the view of Shmuel that the merits of the fathers has in fact expired – in contrast to the covenant with the fathers which will never expire, as indicated by our pasuk. In light of this view, Tosafos discuss the propriety of mentioning the good deeds of the fathers in the prayers.