

Nature: A Teacher III

Why Must we Bless God on Natural Phenomena?

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Parashas Ekev

RABBI BERNARD FOX

"And now Israel what does the Hashem your G-d seek from you? Only to fear Hashem your G-d, to go in all of His ways, to love Him, to serve Hashem your G-d with all your heart and all your soul, to observe the commandments of Hashem and His laws that I command you today for your own benefit." (Devarim 10:12-13)

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Blessings on Nature

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

Talmud Brachos, page 54a discusses various blessings recited over the natural world. On shooting stars or comets, earthquakes, thunder, winds (tornadoes), and lightning, we recite "Blessed are You Ha-shem, our God, King of the universe, that His strength and might fill the universe." Over mountains, valleys, seas, rivers and deserts, we say "Blessed are You Ha-shem, our God, King of the universe, Who performs

acts of Creation."

What is the distinction between these two groups, that each deserves a different praise? What is each praise? Why must we praise God for these phenomena?

On the latter group, Rashi says that we recite "...Who performs acts of Creation", as each are heard or seen from a distance. What is Rashi's theory? What does distance have to

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Blessings on Nature

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

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do with our recital?

Tosfos states that the rivers which demand the former blessing are not all rivers, but only those mentioned in Genesis. According to Tosfos, all mountains would require a blessing upon seeing them, even those not mentioned in the Torah. (I might add that according to Jewish law, we only recite this blessing when we have not seen the mountains, sea, etc. in more than 30 days. This too requires an explanation.) But what is Tosfos' main theory, that only the four rivers in Genesis require this blessing, but no others? And why are rivers treated differently than other Earthly topography?

In both cases, Rashi and Tosfos define the essential criteria which demand these specific blessings. Analyzing their statements will direct us to the true features requiring blessings.

Let us first try to categorize these two sets. What category would contain shooting stars or comets, earthquakes, thunder, winds (tornadoes), and lightning? To assist in defining the unique character of these, contrast them to the latter set; mountains, valleys, seas, rivers and deserts. Think for a moment before reading further what two categories these phenomena represent?

It appears that the first set is of natural laws, or 'forces' in nature. The second set does not contain forces, but rather, 'objects', represented by various, but impressive Earthly topography. We learn that both, God's 'laws' of Creation, winds, lightning, etc., and His 'objects' of Creation - land and water masses - both of which are of impressive in man's eyes, require man to praise God. Our next step is to deduce what we can. That man must bless God over these phenomena, we deduce that man must direct his appreciation for the universe, towards the Creator. Witnessing Creation's primary and impressive features must culminate in an appreciation for the Creator, as this is a purpose in God's Creation of such marvelous forces and Earthly domains. God desires man reach his Maker through a study of the universe, and he therefore embedded in the natural world such startling evidence of His own handiwork.

This is of such great importance, that Maimonides says it is for this reason that the Rabbis instituted blessings. Hilchos Brachos, 1:4, "We find that all the blessings entirely, are three types; blessings over pleasure, blessings over commands, and blessings over thanks, which are in the form of praise, thanks and requests, in order to remember the Creator regularly, and to fear Him."

It is important to realize that only two categories are blessed over, as there are only two categories in Creation; 1)matter, and 2)laws, governing matter. I also believe it is these two categories which Genesis addresses. We first read of the six days of creation, of heaven and Earth, the luminaries, plant life, animals, and man. But what we notice is that we are reading only of the objects created, matter. As we commence chapter 2 in Genesis, verse 4, we take note that the Torah describes the workings of plants, then, with no break, describes the creation of man once again, this time referring to him identical to animals, as a "nefesh chaya" a living soul - not as in chapter 1, where man was referred to a "tzelem Elokim", a likeness of God. Why the change? I believe in chapter 1, man is described in his true essence - a thinking being. In chapter 2, man is described in terms of his inner, psychological workings. This I

deduce because just as plants are described in their workings, and with no break in that Torah section, man is introduced, our traditions teach that all subjects in one single Torah section must be related. Therefore, if plants are described with their governing laws, so to man. So Genesis describes the matter of Creation in chapter 1, and in chapter 2, discusses the workings, or governing laws of Creation. God made two things, matter and laws governing that matter. (As an interesting thought, if man is now being described in his behavior, where is his behavior described? All we see is the four rivers, but that too is of interest, as King Solomon also spoke of rivers in the beginning of his work, Ecclesiastes, "Koheles". Is there a parallel?)

Returning to the subject, we now see there are two areas of Creation, matter and laws. The blessing over laws, is now befitting, "...that His strength and might fill the universe." Laws refer to God's might. What about matter? Why does the blessing over seas, mountains, etc., deserve the blessing, "...Who performs acts of Creation"? The answer is that when we witness a vast ocean or a huge mountain, it is static. But, we are very impressed. We ponder, "Who made this?" Or, "How did this get here?" Our minds immediately reflect on its creation, as we know for certain that this mountain has been standing here since day one. It reflects Creation. For this reason, we praise God and recite, "...Who performs acts of Creation". Both blessings appear appropriate for their respective subject

matter.

We can now turn to Rashi's and Tosfos' statements. Rashi says that we recite "...Who performs acts of Creation", as each are heard or seen from a distance. What is Rashi's theory? I believe Rashi indicates what demands blessing: It must be that which forms part of our experience, and although distant, a comet, thunder, lightning or an earthquake are very much part of our experience. They are all so impressive, distance plays no role in diminishing the effects of these natural phenomena. This I believe is Rashi's point. He teaches us that blessings demand personal experience, and in all cases, we have experienced something quite phenomenal.

Tosfos says that the four rivers in Genesis alone require blessing, and no others. But ALL mountains would require blessings. What is the distinction between a river and a mountain? A river is active, it flows. Why does this matter? Perhaps Tosfos means to say that the four rivers were the first rivers, and they created all others. Meaning, these four alone were created as rivers, and all others were not acts of God's direct Creation, but later offshoots. Tosfos teaches that we only bless over that which God made, not which nature created. But all mountains are direct creations of God, one mountain is not a cause for another. Therefore, we bless over any mountain. Other rivers may be the cause of rain, or snow caps on mountains that melt, so we don't bless on them. This latter explanation was offered by my friend and chavrusa, Yoni. ■



Parashas Ekev

RABBI BERNARD FOX

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Moshe explains to Bnai Yisrael that the Almighty seeks their complete, wholehearted service. However, this does not require any sacrifice of their own self-interest. All that Hashem requests from Bnai Yisrael is for their own benefit. If the nation wishes to pursue its own self-interest, it will faithfully serve the Almighty.

Moshe continues with two additional points. First, he reminds Bnai Yisrael that the Almighty is the master of the heavens, the earth and all that exist, therein. Second, Hashem chose the forefathers and their descendants to be recipients of His love and attention. How are these points related to Moshe's previous assertion regarding the benefit of a Torah life?

Sforno addresses this issue. He explains that the Almighty is ruler of the entire universe. The heavens and earth, through their perfection, testify to the glory of their Creator. Therefore, the service of humanity does not add to His grandeur.

Nonetheless, the Almighty performed miracles on behalf of the forefathers and Bnai Yisrael. This is paradoxical. A miracle is an abrogation of the natural law. This law is the work of the Almighty. Why does the Creator rescind His own natural order for the benefit of humanity?

Sforno responds that this can only be the result of some unique characteristic of humankind. We are created in the image of the Almighty. This provides us with the potential for a singular perfection. No other creation is created in Hashem's image. In order to help us achieve this perfection, the Creator performs miracles and suspends His own natural laws.

According to Sforno, all of Moshe's points are related. Moshe tells Bnai Yisrael that observance of the Torah will enrich their lives. He then proves his assertion. Hashem does not seek our obedience in order to glorify Himself. We do not add to His grandeur through our observance of the mitzvot. What then is His purpose in giving us the Torah? Moshe shows that the Almighty is concerned with the perfection of humanity. This must His purpose in delivering the Torah to us.[1]

“For Hashem, your G-d, is the supreme G-d and the master of all masters. He is the great, mighty and awesome G-d. He does not show favor or accept bribes.” (Devarim 10:17)

The text of most of our prayers was composed

by the Anshai Keneset HaGedolah – the Members of the Great Assembly. This assembly of Sages was established during the first exile. It was led by Ezra. This institution continued to operate until the period of the Hashmonayim.

In our passage, Moshe praises the Almighty. He describes the Almighty as great, mighty and awesome. This description was incorporated by the Members of the Great Assembly into our daily prayers. This phrase is the cornerstone of the first benediction of the Amidah.

There is an amazing discussion in the Talmud regarding this phrase. In this discussion the Talmud seeks the derivation of the title “Great Assembly”. Why was this group of Sages granted this title? The Talmud responds that these Sages returned to the Almighty His crown. Moshe referred to Hashem as great, mighty and awesome. The prophet Yirmiyahu observed heathens destroying the Almighty's Temple. He exclaimed, “Where is the awesome nature of the Almighty?” He deleted the term awesome from his prayers. Daniel observed that the heathen nations had subjugated Bnai Yisrael. He exclaimed, “Where is the might of Hashem?” He deleted the term “mighty” from his prayers. The Members of the great Assembly responded that these deletions were not appropriate. The awesome nature of the Almighty remains evident even in exile. Hashem forestalls His punishment of the heathen nations. Through this forbearance, the Almighty demonstrates self-restraint. This forbearance is a demonstration of might.

Hashem's awesome nature is also evident during exile. Bnai Yisrael is a small nation, dispersed among the heathen nations. These nations seek to destroy the Jewish people. Yet, the Almighty's nation survives in this hostile world. The continued existence of Bnai Yisrael is a moving demonstration of the Almighty's awesome nature.[2]

We can understand a portion of this discussion. Certainly, the survival of Bnai Yisrael is miraculous. This survival is an expression of Hashem's providence and his mastery over all the nations of the world. However, the Talmud's explanation of Hashem's might is more difficult to comprehend. How does the Almighty's restraint in not punishing the heathens demonstrate His might?

In order to answer this question we must establish two premises. First, it is impossible to understand the comments of the Talmud in their literal sense. In fact, a literal interpretation would be blasphemous. The Almighty is a perfect unity. He cannot be viewed as composed of parts. Therefore, we cannot actually ascribe restraint to Hashem. Restraint is defined as acting against one's inclination or nature. This would mean that Hashem's will is restraining or suppressing His nature. This, in turn, implies that

Hashem is “will” and “nature”. This is not consistent with the concept of the Almighty's unity. Why does the Talmud attribute restraint to Hashem? The Talmud is attempting to explain a difficult concept in terms that are familiar to us. In other words, the Talmud is employing figurative description to explain a difficult concept. What is this concept?

This brings us to the second premise. Human beings have volition. We have the ability to choose between good and evil. This ability explains the existence of evil in the world. The Almighty provides us with the ability to choose. Sometimes, we choose evil. This choice introduces evil into the world.

This analysis is somewhat flawed or incomplete. In fact, freewill and evil are inexplicable miracles. We cannot fathom the Almighty's nature. However, we do know that He is omnipotent. He is the master of all that exists. Virtually all of creation is completely obedient to the Almighty. The natural laws operate in perfect accordance with His will. A plant cannot decide to not blossom. Gravity cannot elect to arrest its own operation. The universe demonstrates the awesome might of its Creator. Yet, Hashem created on element in His universe that can seemingly deny His omnipotence. This is the human being. We have the ability to sin. Evil can temporarily triumph. In the victory of evil the glory of the Almighty is hidden from view. This phenomenon is not explicable. It is an incomprehensible miracle.

We can now understand the comments of the Talmud. Our sages are drawing our attention to the miracle of sin. We cannot explain the granting of freewill. Freewill, by definition, creates the option to sin. Sin produces evil. Evil, obscures the Almighty's omnipotence. The Talmud is not attempting to explain this phenomenon. It is instructing us to appreciate that evil involves a miracle that is beyond human comprehension.

“And if you will be obedient to my commandments that I command to you this day, and you will love Hashem your G-d and serve Him with all your heart and soul, then I will provide rain in its proper time – in the beginning and the end of the season – and you will gather you r grain, oil and wine.” (Devarim 11:13-14)

In these pesukim Moshe relates Hashem's promise to Bnai Yisrael. The nation must be obedient to the Torah. The people must wholeheartedly love and serve the Almighty. Hashem promises that, in return, He will assure that the land produces its bounty.

These passages are recited in the second paragraph to the Shema. Nachmanides observes

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that these pesukim are very similar to the admonition found in last week's Torah portion. That set of pesukim are the first paragraph of the Shema. There, Moshe exhorts us to love Hashem with a complete heart and soul. However, there is a difference between the two passages. Our pesukim are in the second-person plural. Moshe is addressing the nation as a whole. In the first paragraph of the Shema, the admonition is stated in the second-person singular. Moshe is addressing each individual member of the nation. What is the reason for this distinction?

Nachmanides begins with an observation. The context of the two exhortations differs. In the first paragraph of the Shema, Moshe is discussing our obligations. He explains that we are obligated to love and serve the Almighty. In the second paragraph Moshe is discussing providence or reward and punishment. He explains that the welfare of the nation depends upon obedience to the mitzvot and the people's relationship with Hashem.

Nachmanides explains the use of the singular or plural form based on this distinction. We are individually obligated to observe the commands and serve Hashem. Moshe stresses this personal obligation by using the first person. However, providence is consequence of the behavior of the nation.

In order to better understand this explanation, it is helpful to review Nachmanides' general understanding of providence. Nachmanides maintains that any act of providence involves – by definition – an intrusion into the laws of nature. His argument is simple and compelling. Let us consider an example. Reward and punishment are expressions of providence. We are told that the nation will be rewarded for observing the Torah. Our crops will be bountiful and we will enjoy the wealth of the land. This implies that we could not, through natural causes, be assured of this outcome. Hashem will intervene in the course of nature to assure that we receive these blessings. The blessings are produced through an alteration in the natural chain of cause and effect. Accordingly, Nachmanides argues that every reward and punishment involves a hidden miracle. The suspension of natural law is not observable in these instances. Yet, it occurs.[3]

Nachmanides maintains that the Creator endowed the universe with physical properties.

He wills the natural laws to exist. In the absence of providential interference, cause and effect governs the affairs of the universe. This is the fundamental basis for Nachmanides' interpretation of our passage.

The Almighty does not suspend His laws gratuitously. Just as He wills our obedience to the laws of the Torah, He also sustains the natural laws. Providence is exercised sparingly. The fate of Bnai Yisrael – as a nation – is guided by providence. However, individuals do not enjoy the same providential relationship with the Almighty. Nachmanides argues that only the righteous and the wicked can expect providential treatment. The fate of more "average" individuals is primarily guided by natural law.[4]

According to Nachmanides, Moshe used the plural in our passages to communicate the special providential status of the nation. Whereas the individual is generally subject to the caprice of nature, Bnai Yisrael's welfare is directly guided by the Almighty. □

[1] Rabbaynu Ovadia Sforno, Commentary on Sefer Devarim 10:12-15.

[2] Mesechet Yoma 69b.

[3] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Nachman (Ramban / Nachmanides), Ketvai HaRamban, Drush – Torat Hashem Temimah (Mosad HaRav Kook, 5724), pp. 67-71.

[4] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Nachman (Ramban / Nachmanides), Commentary on Sefer Devarim 11:13.

Is Truth Available?

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

Reader: I have been reading avidly on MANY Jewish sites and am in the process of questioning many of the beliefs that I was raised with. But there is one question that I would like help with. I have read much about the 7 Noahide Laws, but if one did not read the Talmud, one would not readily find them. I believe that I have read six of the seven can be found in Genesis 2:16-17 and the seventh in chapter 9. But I do not understand how this could be fair. What of the Gentile nations that for centuries did not have the written or the oral Torah or Rabbis to help them out. What of all the Indian tribes in the America's before Columbus or the tribesmen in Papua New Guinea? How would they have found out what the righteous requirements of the Law would be for in order to be a righteous Gentile? If they were just "out of luck", then I see little difference between this philosophy and the concept that all

that have not accepted Jesus go to Hell. Both would consign whole groups of people to not having a part in the Life Hereafter simply because they were not born in the right place at the right time. Or, how would ANY Gentile learn of the 7 Laws unless they ask a Rabbi or read the Talmud and made it to the Sanhedrin section (I hope that is correct- forgive me if I am wrong)? If it were not for the Internet, I would not have heard of them. There HAS to be some universal way that G-d communicates to His creation of what He wants them to do and what He expects, but not all have had access to the Torah or Rabbis. I honestly am not trying to be contentious and hope someone will respond. I have asked questions from other sites, but many times feel like a "second class citizen" because I am not Jewish. I love G-D and am searching and reading and praying and feel in a spiritual crisis to some degree because of some of the questions that I am looking at in my life. This particular question has been bugging me though. Thank you in advance. Michael

Mesora: God "universally" wishes all mankind to study His wisdom, and to be attached to nothing except truth of His existence, His works, His abilities, and His justice. As Abraham proved, we all possess the intelligence necessary for, and fully capable of, questioning any belief. Abraham extricated himself from idolatry using his mind alone.

However cherished and comfortable our beliefs may be, intelligence offers absolute conviction, in contrast to blindly-accepted rituals and notions inherited from our fathers, which offer only belief and comfort with the "familiar". However, belief tells us nothing about the true nature of things, the world, or of God. It is a free-for-all system where comprehension is absent, and thus, knowledge of what is true is impossible. A system of belief raises one who is "devout", far higher than one who questions with his mind. And even worse, those who question their "belief" are chastised. The majority of world population follows unproven, and dangerous notions. If one would guide his business dealings with the same blind fervor he employs with regards to his religious beliefs, every man would be a pauper. "Believing" in a business venture without careful analysis is stupid, and leads one to poverty. The dichotomy between one's religious life, and all his other affairs, is unfortunately, quite rampant. This very dichotomy is addressed in the Haftora of Leviticus, Isaiah 43.

The Bible - God's Torah - has been, and remains, universally available. True, most cultures will have to sift through many false religions and idolatrous notions until they arrive at the Bible, God's Torah. But if a given individual uses his intelligence, and is honest, he

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Is Truth Available?

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will arrive at the truth. The Torah makes clear what is truth, and what is false. The process of study under proper teachers illuminates one to a true method of thinking, which with continued study, equips the new Torah student with his own tools for independent analyses. So the identification of God's system for all mankind, the singular truth, is readily available, and by definition, has been for anyone who sought it out.

The fact that God did not give His Torah until the year 2448 indicates that prior to the Torah, God was still reachable through one's mind. Your argument that certain cultures were bereft of any chance of realizing God's truths is not altogether accurate. Again, Abraham displays what man is capable of achieving - without Torah.

Additionally, idolatrous cultures are man-made. Suggesting an "unfair" situation for man, as he is bereft of truth, was not God's doing, but man's. If you have an argument, it should not be lodged against God for keeping the truth unattainable - which it is not - but you should reprimand idolatrous cultures for veering from a life of intelligence, and misleading generations.

Regarding the teachers of the Torah - the Rabbis - I know of many including myself who have given of their time, and remain available to teach Gentiles and Jews alike. This is our obligation, and God's will, that Jews study Torah, and teach it to all peoples. We just read in last weeks Torah reading, that our upholding of the Torah should eventuate in the world's admiration of God's relationship with the Jews, and the beauty of His commands. Abraham, our founder, exemplified more than any other, how far one must go to teach others of God's wisdom. He sacrificed his life to do so.

It is unfortunate that you received "second class" treatment. This is absolutely wrong and against Torah. Gentiles are created by God, just as Jews are. There is no room in God's Torah for treating a righteous Gentile poorly.

Once a Gentile studies Torah and its system of perpetuation, he will understand who is a true Torah scholar, and who can teach him how God desires all Gentiles to behave, and what to know as their Noachide Laws. ■

Negligence & Culpability

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

Reader: It has been a long time since I wrote. I hope you and yours are well. A question: a child was diagnosed with an immune disease that eventually killed the child. In hindsight one of the attending physicians noticed that the original team of doctors had overlooked something in the early reports that MAY have made a difference in the youngster's life. Now that particular professional is ridden with guilty feelings. I would like something halachic to put in his hands to help free him from this emotional and spiritual burden. Thank you, Ed.

Mesora: Ed, I hope all is well. Please inform the original doctor/team, that there should be no guilt for evil "results" if our actions were guided as best as humanly possible. We have little control over the innumerable variables in any situation. One of these variables is our limited knowledge. If action was required to save the child, and all the knowledge available was used, then the doctor should feel equal, to when saving someone. Talmud Berachos, first Mishna in chapter 9 says we must praise God for evil, just as we must do for the good. This means according to a Rabbi's interpretation, that we must accept reality, regardless of our emotional reactions to that reality, be it elation, or disappointment. So too here. The doctor must feel satisfied that he employed his best knowledge, and the results must not detract from his well intended actions. This is the point, to focus on what IS our responsibility, i.e., actions, NOT results, which are not necessarily in our control.

If however, one has overlooked something due to an error of not checking all charts, carelessly deviating from standard protocol, etc., the there is guilt here, as the physician was negligent regarding human life. He must search himself for a cause of this negligence in connection with human life, a grave sin. He must analyze himself, recognize his error, his destruction of human life, and with his regret,

commit to absolute, careful behavior to guard against such a sin. He must ask God for forgiveness. God forgives those who sincerely regret their sins, and are 100% committed to removing such a character flaw.

The Torah teaches of one who kills "accidentally". If it was accident, why is there a "City of Refuge" as part of the Torah system, to collect and protect accidental killers from irate relatives? Why does the accidental killer go free with the death of the High priest? What is the connection to this High Priest?

Accidental killers are not so guiltless. Had they been 100% careful not to harm human life, they would not have killed. It is due to ignorance that an archer, for example, fires his arrow on a person, and not on an animal. Had the archer realized he was not 100% certain whether he aims at a deer or "someone else", he would not have let his arrow fly. There is no excuse for "accidental" murder. This is the Torah's principle. It is based on truth. The archer was careless, just as careless as one ascending a ladder falls on one below him, or a doctor who injects too much medication, or cuts too close to an artery. When human life is at risk, we must be 100% certain we do not endanger another. If this precaution is taken, no one will kill accidentally, ever.

Why is the killer freed with the death of the High Priest? A Rabbi once gave a remarkable answer: the killer knows his freedom depends on the Priest's death. It is almost certain that this killer will wish for the Priest's death. This wish will hopefully awaken the killer to his disregard for human life. Hopefully, he will thereby recognize it is this very disregard that caused his predicament. Forcing a killer to realize his neglect for life is the first step towards repentance, and this is God's wish for all mankind. He wishes we recognize our errors, feel regret, and commit to a change in our values so as never to return to our evil ways. An ingenious answer.

Knowledge of human psychology is essential for an appreciation of Torah laws. ■

Blessings on Nature

Additional images to enhance our appreciation of God's might.

Satellite photo of a hurricane, larger than a few U.S. states



Blessings on Nature

Additional images to enhance our appreciation of God's might.

This lightning storm stretches tens of miles



Blessings on Nature

Additional images to enhance our appreciation of God's might.

Barringer Meteor Crater, Arizona Diameter: 0.737 miles Age: 49,000 years

