

WHERE TO LOOK FOR MIRACLES

Jacob Joshua Ross

1. We shall deal with one of the lesser known arguments between two of the greatest Rabbinical leaders of Judaism in the middle ages Maimonides –the Rambam {hereafter “M”}(1135-1204) and Nahmanides –the Ramban (hereafter “N”) (1194-1270). Both were born in Spain, M in Cordoba, N in Gerona, but whereas M left Spain with his parents when he was 13 years old, and lived most of his life in North Africa (Fez and Cairo), N lived most of his life in Spain. The essential points which concern us are that they obviously never met each other, and that N was an admirer of M’s *halakhic* writings (especially the *Mishneh Torah*) and a conciliator who tried to defend M’s reputation against the critics who questioned the M’s philosophical approach to Judaism. Yet, as we shall see, he himself disagreed with M’s rationalist and naturalist views.

2. M writes: My endeavor, and that of the select keen-minded people, differs from the quest of the masses. They like nothing better and, in their silliness, enjoy nothing more, than to set the Law [i.e. the Torah] and reason at opposite ends, and to move everything far from the explicable. So they claim it to be a miracle, and they shrink from identifying it as a natural incident, whether it is something that happened in the past and is recorded, or something predicted to happen in the future. But I try to reconcile the Law [the Torah] and reason, and wherever possible consider all things as of the natural order. Only when something is explicitly identified as a miracle, and reinterpretation of it cannot be accommodated, only then I feel forced to grant that it is a miracle. (*The Essay on Resurrection*, Halkin’s translation p.223)

3. In his writings the M attempts to minimize the miraculous as much as possible. His forced recognition is so minimal that some scholars have argued that really he does not accept them at all, in the usual sense, and his “forced recognition” is a pretence. We will not go into the details of this scholarly discussion. It is sufficient for us to know that he treats “miracles” as very unusual occurrences within the system of nature which the prophet can foretell in virtue of his powers of prophecy. What is more significant is that M indicates, both in his early *Commentary on the Mishnah* (introduction to *Pirkei Avot. Shemoneh Perakim, Perik Shemini*) as well as in the sections of the *Guide of the Perplexed (Moreh Nevukhim)* in which he discusses divine providence (III 17-19) that although there is such a thing as “*hashgahah peratit*” i.e. providential protection of individual human beings in accordance with their deserts, in addition to the “*hashgahah kelalit*” i.e. the providential maintenance of species, kinds, and order in the universe that we nowadays call “nature,” God does not directly intervene in the affairs of mankind and history, and everything which happens was foreseen in advance, so that the providential protection is built-in to the world in advance. This whole conception is extremely sophisticated and it may well be that the notion of “a possible world” attributed to G.W.Leibniz in the 17th century is one which was suggested to this great German philosopher by his reading of these chapters in the M’s *Guide*.

4. It is precisely this aspect of M’s thought to which N took violent exception. He writes:

It is clear that the well-known miracles that took place in the exodus from Egypt teach us that the world was created, that God knows everything, and that there is providential guidance [to human affairs]. For this reason we were commanded to preserve their memory on stone [as in the verse “And thou shall write upon the stones all the words of this law very plainly” (Deuteronomy 27:8)] and in the mezuzah [on the doorposts] where they are visible when you go out or come in, and in the tefilin on your head and on your arm, and to refer to them in the reading of the “Shema” prayer every morning and evening, in the Sukkah and on Pesach, and so on. These commandments have become very pleasant and beloved so that whenever a person sees or performs them he gives thanks to the Lord – and this is the whole purpose of the creation. For there was no other reason for the creation of man and God has no interest in what happens in the mundane world other than that man should thank his creator...[All this is necessary because] most people think that God does not always perform miracles

and that the world simply carries on [naturally] in its normal fashion. This is what many of the philosophers suppose and the Rav [i.e. the Rambam] is one of them. However when we look more closely we can see that no person has a portion in the Torah of Moses our teacher until he recognizes that all our affairs and actions are bound up with miracles. Our success in their performance is not natural or part of the habitual custom of the world. For all the rewards [and punishments] of the Torah are complete miracles. (N's Sermon: The Torah of God is Perfect, my translation of Chavell's edition pp. 152-3)

4. This sermon was delivered in the synagogue in Barcelona and contains many excerpts from the N's commentary on the Torah. Much of the above quotation is to be found also in N's commentary on Exodus 13:8 and there he says more explicitly of such miracles in Israel's past that **...these great miracles and signs of the past are trustworthy evidence for belief in the Creator and the Torah in general. Since the Almighty will not perform such miracles and signs in every generation for any transgressor or unbeliever, He commanded us [=our forefathers] to practice *mitzvot* which recall what our[=their] eyes saw and pass these on to their children, and children's children until the last generation. He laid down grave punishments for the failure to perform these *mitzvot* ...and from the memory of these great and famous miracles a person comes recognize the hidden miracles which are the foundation of the whole Torah for no person has a portion in the Torah of Moses our teacher until he recognizes that all our affairs and incidents are bound up with miracles and are not natural or part of normal course of events, whether these concern individuals or communities.**

5. (1) N regards the great miracles of the past as pedagogical intimations to us of these hidden miracles which we must learn to recognize. Hidden miracles are those which occur within the normal function of natural events. It is the intervention of the divine that is hidden, and we must learn to seek in them "the hand of God" (2) There is a tradition from Shmuel Hanagid, and Avraham Ibn Ezra based on Talmudic sources that one's fate may be changed by "jumping over" stellar influence as the result of "cleaving" directly to God. N too believes that events may also be fated by the stars (astrology) (3) Prayer, both communal and personal, is a means of "cleaving" to God, and so too is the meticulous observance of God's commandments (4) Hence an occurrence (such as the recovery of a beloved person from a serious disease) may be accidental or fated, but if it occurs as the answer to our prayers we may well regard it as a hidden miracle. (5) N seemingly qualifies this by saying that: **You should know that miracles, whether for the good or the bad, are performed only for the completely righteous or the completely wicked. But those in the middle range may expect good or bad to be done to them within the normal way of the world, that is, only in accordance with their own way of life and deeds. (commentary to Deuteronomy 11:13)** But the context of the remark seems to indicate that he is speaking of the providential care given to individuals in a group the majority of which are righteous or wicked.

6. There are similarities between M and N: for example "*hashgahah peratit*"(M) = "*nes nistar*"(N). But also big differences which explain why M could never have accepted the idea of "*nes nistar*" :

(1) For M there is no divine intervention after the creation of the universe, since this would be a change of the divine creative Will ("*ratson kadum*") which means that it was less than perfect, whereas for N continuous divine intervention is the very essence of the relationship between God and the universe (2) For M there is only one form of relationship between God and the world which is fixed, designed, and natural and the greatness and wisdom of the Creator is evidenced in the enormous complexity of the design in the universe. Man has to learn to fit in with design, understand it and achieve immortality and the Love of God. The measure of a person's *hashgahah peratit* (the providential care which he may expect to enjoy) is the extent of his intellectual perfection.; For N there are two forms of relationship between God and the world, the first something wrongly called "nature" but which is really a fixed miracle "*nes kavua*" with regard to generalities, species and sorts, and the second a hidden miracle "*nes nistar*" which shows itself in the divine interventions with regard to the particular events concerning individuals or groups which would otherwise be accidental or fated by the stars.