



God's providence

RABBI YAKOV BRONSTEYN
Beshalach, Exodus 13:17-17:16

The world is a beautiful place. We are awed by the Swiss Alps. We are amazed by the Grand Canyon. There are so many breathtaking places. They are too numerous to name. When we find ourselves in such a place or just witnessing an "ordinary sunset" we wonder, is this accidental? Or did someone make it beautiful?

If we investigate further, the world seems to be designed. The sun sets, the sun rises. There is day, there is night. The sun seems to be the perfect distance from the earth. If it were a little too far, it would be too cold. If it were a little too close, it would be too hot. As the Midrash in the portion of Lech Lecha points out, Abraham, our forefather, asked these questions. He came to a conclusion: There is a God. He created the Universe.

In Egypt, God showed everyone that He also controls the universe. In this week's portion, Beshalach, this message is brought home.

In order to save the Jewish people, God instructs Moses to split the Red Sea. Moses lifts his staff and the deed is done. One of the most dramatic passages in Torah relates how the Jewish people walked through the sea to the plateau of their salvation. The Egyptians follow them in. Then God tells Moses to raise his staff and make the sea return to its original state. He does. It returns. The Egyptians drown. The Jews are saved. They burst into joy and song.

Rabbi Chaim ben Atar, in his commentary on the Torah, Ohr HaChaim (Exodus 14:26), asks, Why did Moses have to lift his staff to return the sea to its original state? When it is split, that is a miracle. When it returns to its original state, that is nature. Yet it seems like the same effort was made by Moses to split the sea as to return it to its original state. Why? Performing miracles is an effort; returning something to its natural state is not. That is the way the sea has functioned since creation. Therefore, as soon as the Jewish people emerged from the sea, it would have returned to its original state.

Rabbi Akiva Tatz, in his book "Worldmask," answers that the miraculous state of being is just as miraculous as the natural state of being. It is not natural for the sea to be split or to flow. Both are miracles. Therefore, to change the sea from whatever state it is in requires the same effort. That is why God instructed Moses to raise his staff to return the sea to its original state.

This same idea is expressed by Nachmanides in his famous commentary on the Torah at the end of the portion of Bo (Exodus 13:16). He writes that there is no such thing as nature. God controls everything. Therefore, everything is a miracle. The difference between what we call a miracle and what we call nature is the following: What we call nature is what we are used to. What we call miracle is what we are not used to. This understanding, he writes, is the bedrock of the Jewish faith.

Since everything that happens is miraculous, of course God makes it happen. Therefore, He controls the universe that He created.

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