



2016

## **Divine Providence and Free Will**

Stanley Boylan

*Touro College*, stanleyb@touro.edu

Follow this and additional works at: [https://touro scholar.touro.edu/nyscas\\_pubs](https://touro scholar.touro.edu/nyscas_pubs)



Part of the [Jewish Studies Commons](#), and the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

---

### **Recommended Citation**

Boylan, S. (2016). Divine providence and free will. *Hakirah*, 21, 11-14.

This Letter to the Editor is brought to you for free and open access by the New York School of Career and Applied Studies (NYSCAS) at Touro Scholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in New York School for Career and Applied Studies (NYSCAS) Publications and Research by an authorized administrator of Touro Scholar. For more information, please contact [touro.scholar@touro.edu](mailto:touro.scholar@touro.edu).

the king's request to express his beliefs in universal terms (I:11,25; Heinemann trans.):

I believe in the God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, who led the Israelites out of Egypt with signs and miracles; who fed them in the desert and gave them the (Holy) Land...who sent Moses with His Law, and subsequently thousands of prophets, who confirmed His law by promises to those who observed and threats to the disobedient...

In the same way God commenced His speech to the assembled people of Israel: "I am the God whom you worship, who hath led you out of the land of Egypt"; He did not say "I am the Creator of the world and your Creator." In the same style I spoke to thee, O Prince of the Khazars, when thou didst ask me about my creed.

In other words, Halevi does not deny that Judaism is a religion containing dogmas, but he does deny that these dogmas are to be found in abstract philosophical principles. It is precisely for this reason that I cited Halevi's discussion in III:17—to demonstrate that even the anti-philosophy school represented by Halevi accepts that Judaism is a religion defined by specific beliefs, and that this is not a Maimonidean innovation. (For a good overview of the dispute between Rambam and Halevi about the merits of philosophy, see R. Sheilat's

*Bein ha-Kuzari la-Rambam*, pp. 13–36. R. Sheilat explains his translation decision which upsets Kellner on p. 28 n. 26. I used R. Sheilat's translation because I believe it to be the most accurate one available, despite Prof. Kellner's aspersions. As it happens, on the relevant line in III:17, R. Kafih's translation is virtually identical: ומי שאמר את כל אלה: (בכוונה גמורה, הרי הוא ישראלי באמת.)

## Divine Providence and Free Will

I WRITE IN RESPONSE to the erudite and informative article of Dr. Alan Kadish on the reconciliation of G-d's intervention in the natural world with a mechanistic view of the universe and its physical laws. Specifically, Dr. Kadish refers to the work of Dr. Nicolas Saunders, who raises issues concerning the recognition of Special Divine Action (SDA) within the laws of the cosmos. Dr. Kadish similarly examines the issue of a deterministic universe with regard to Judaism's resolution of the issue of man's free will in a universe determined by the will of the Almighty.

While Dr. Kadish provides a scientific model for so-called SDAs, he does not fully address the **scientific** issues regarding determinism and free-will or free-choice. While some of Dr. Kadish's insights (such as recent developments concerning quantum theory) would be applicable to free will, it would be most useful if a further article exploring scientific issues regarding free will

would be forthcoming. These are two very different models of determinism, but the resolution of free action in a deterministic system is similar. This is an ever more important issue today as scientists are attempting to create a neuro-physical model of brain activity. Man's actions in affecting (and undermining) the stability of earth's ecosystem is well-accepted by many scientists. Understanding man's free will would obviously also address questions on the determinism of natural laws, since mankind by its actions interacts with the world in potentially profound ways.

With regard to the overall issues raised by Dr. Saunders, I had the following general comments:

While the world may seem deterministic to a philosopher or a physicist (or a mathematician, for that matter) examining equations, a human being living on earth experiences the world around him or her as very much a non-deterministic one, a world in which seemingly random events occur, many predictable but others surprising or even seemingly miraculous. Mathematicians can predict the likely outcome of the repetition of independent random events using what they call the "Law of Large Numbers." While there are various theories regarding the origin of statistical consistency and the ultimate randomness of these events, all agree that certain events follow probabilistic patterns. These probabilistic laws do not dictate the outcome of individual events, and, although the probability of long term deviation

from the mean can be measured, these deviations occur with a measurable probability. Special Divine Action, which we call "*hashgacha pratit*," individual providence, can easily occur within these seemingly random events, and believing Jews experience such providence, without expecting that this providence would violate the natural order of the universe. These are included within the Modim prayer, recited thrice daily, wherein we thank the Almighty "... *v-al nisecho sheb'chol yom imonu* (and for the miracles that occur every day...)."

Both the Bible and halacha assert that *nissim*, miracles beyond the everyday, can occur even in our own era. The blessing of "*she'oso nissim* (Who made miracles...)", recited on both Chanukah and Purim, seeks to publicize the miracles of both of those events, which are valued equally as miraculous, although the miracle of Purim may be a *nes nistar*, a hidden miracle. These miracles involved not only the burning of oil beyond the expected time limit, but battlefield victories and political decisions ultimately deciding the fate of the Jewish people.

The halacha also seeks to define the circumstances for which one can recite the individual blessing "*she'oso li nes ba'makom ha'zeh* (Who made a miracle for me in this place)" on individual miraculous events. According to some halachic decisors, we would need a miracle beyond normal human experience to recite such a blessing, but not an experience to overrule the laws of

the cosmos. The Halacha asserts that we can and need to recognize Special Divine Action, even if such would not be recognized by Dr. Saunders.

As a final observation, even if the “equations” governing the physical universe were such as to provide unique solutions, and thus to determine future results, knowledge of these results would be predicated on perfect knowledge of initial conditions. Precisely because the equations of complex systems such as those governing weather conditions are unstable and heavily sensitive to changes in initial conditions, chaotic systems arise that are extremely difficult to predict on a long-term basis. Human-kind’s knowledge is far from perfect; as Dr. Kadish rightly points out, the Heisenberg Uncertainty principle may even set forth some absolute limits on what can be physically known, since measurement itself may interfere in the process and make it impossible to measure momentum and position simultaneously. Chazal tell us, “*Ain habrocho sboruy eleh b’dovor hasomuy min ha-ayin* (Blessings can reside only in material that is hidden from the eye).” Much of human experience is, indeed, hidden from human eyes, our actual measurement (if not the Almighty’s), and it is there that blessings and Special Divine Action can take place.

Principles generally germane to the interface of science and religion are reviewed by the Rashba in a *teshuva* (*Shu”t Rashba* [1:9]). The

Rashba is asked concerning an assertion he had made, based on Talmudic sources that Chazal believed that the world would cease to exist at the end of 6000 years, a position refuted by Maimonides. In this *teshuva*, the Rashba, interestingly enough, appears somewhat sympathetic to the position of Maimonides as to the reinterpretation of medrashic, or even biblical, texts when they come into conflict with a naturalistic physical worldview. However, Rashba asserts, such a leniency in interpretation needs to have limits, even for Maimonides, when it conflicts with accepted doctrines and beliefs derived from revelation. Revelation or prophecy represents a higher-level wisdom, as opposed to the scientific wisdom derived from human “*hakirah* (investigation).” Rashba maintains that the potential end of the universe is an accepted kabbalah or received tradition among the Jewish people.

On the matter of the eternity of the universe, Rashba understands well that science, based on its own understanding of the natural order, its observations of the stars and planets conducting their ordered rounds, and the world following its formulas and determined ways, would not agree with the concept of a sudden end to the universe. (Curiously, thanks to advances in scientific knowledge, we can now more easily conceive of a catastrophic end to human existence than ever before.) Rashba points, however, to the differences in methodology and philosophy of scientific wisdom,

derived solely from its own observations and denying any other avenue of truth but its own, and rejecting the potential for G-d's intervention in nature such as the splitting of the sea, the giving of the Torah, or other miracles.

A constant of Jewish theology is that the Almighty and His *Chochma* (wisdom) are one and the same. Since the Almighty cannot be totally known, neither can the *Chochma*, by which He orders the universe, be totally understood. Our knowledge of the universe, dictated by our own finite understanding, is therefore limited. To this end, Rashba points to the incompleteness of man's scientific knowledge of the world, using the phenomena of magnetism as an example. No doubt, Aristotle, if merely told about magnetism, would have rejected it as impossible, as a phenomenon he could not explain based on a materialistic interpretation of the universe. Once magnetism was demonstrated, Aristotle worked to develop a theory for magnetic action. (One is reminded of Einstein's characterization of gravity as "spooky action at a distance" and his own efforts to explain it.)

Rashba argues that Judaism, too, incorporates additional axioms, based on its revealed knowledge of the Almighty, to explain that G-d, the Creator, may intervene in nature to preserve the natural order or to change it. Therefore, the Rashba asserts, even a scientist such as Maimonides recognizes that the wisdom of the Almighty is greater than

that of humankind, and that doctrine takes precedence over our knowledge derived from the natural order. Finally, Rashba reminds us that science is always subject to change, that Plato disproved philosophers before him, and that Aristotle subsequently rejected the teachings of Plato. Therefore a healthy skepticism for the claims of science needs to accompany anyone in seeking to address scientific criticism of religious doctrine.

Dr. Kadish has shown us how to incorporate the opportunity for Hashem's actions even within the scientific world-view of natural causation. We need to be aware that science itself is never complete, and that there always is a time and need and potential for Special Divine Action.

*Stanley Boylan*

VP Undergraduate Education  
Dean of Faculties, Touro College

I ENJOYED the interesting article "God, Man, Chaos and Control: How God Might Control the Universe" by Dr. Alan Kadish (*Hakirah* volume 20), which considers the apparent conflict between divine providence and free will. I would like to comment on this article, and also add something to what I wrote on this subject, in "Divine Providence and Natural Forces: Conflict or Harmony" (*Hakirah* 19).

The author asserts (pp. 124–128) that "Attempts to reconcile providence and free will in the Jewish intellectual tradition essentially