

PARSHAS HAAZINU - PROVIDENCE, JUSTIFIED AND EXPLAINED

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Providence, Justified and Explained¹

The Tzur - perfect is His work. All his ways are justice.

Tzur is usually translated as "Rock," signifying the strength and permanence of G-d. The word can also be seen, however, as related to yotzer, depicting Hashem as the Creator of everything. This would be attractive, because misunderstanding of Hashem's providential justice often stems from failing to appreciate His role as Creator.

By "perfect" we mean to repudiate the view of those who complain about His justice, or what they think is injustice. They note that G-d allows/causes events that disrupt, injure, or ruin what previously seemed to be perfect. Our pasuk asserts that the opposite is true. Hashem's providence perfects what previously was flawed. The psukim that follow address historical episodes, showing the justice in tragic events that befell our people. One overarching idea introduces them: All His ways are justice.

"Justice" is not quite the same as "just." While Hashem's ways are certainly just, the Torah here has us focus on images of justice, of the way issues are addressed in a court of law. A judge extracts a kingly sum from a defendant. An uninformed observer sees a well-to-do person leave the court practically a pauper. Seemingly, the defendant has been harmed, injured, left far less whole and perfect than when he entered. A person who followed the trial, and heard the judge explain why he finds the defendant guilty of grand larceny, knows that the judge is making things right - not wrong - by relieving him of money that he obtained illegally.

HKBH's providence works similarly. Many things seem unfair to us. However, we are unaware that there is justice in these events, and that they actually right the wrongs that we cannot see.

Our pasuk emphasizes why we can have this confidence. It calls Hashem the "Tzur," underscoring His role as Creator. He could not be the Creator without a mastery of everything that is unfathomable to us, but from which we understand that all knowledge is included in the "everything" that He masters. His providence can be extensive because His knowledge is complete. Additionally, as Creator, He has an interest and stake, so to speak, in what happens in His world. Human activities affect the integrity and function of His creation. He cannot simply "look away," or forgive every

trespass. He made reward and punishment parts of the fabric of Creation. His providence must be seen as a form of justice, sometimes taking something from one place and moving it elsewhere, just as a court would do.

Chanah spoke these words: "Do not abound in speaking with loftiness upon loftiness. Let not haughtiness come from your mouth. Hashem is the G-d of thoughts. Deeds are accounted by Him[2]." She addresses three popular misconceptions about G-d's providence - or more accurately, three positions, all of which deny G-d's providence.

The first sees G-d as so elevated and exalted above the events of the human world, that He has no knowledge of them at all. The second rejectionist position posits that G-d certainly could know about all events of this world, but effectively abandoned it from His active interest. He does not consider earthly happenings significant enough to give them any attention. A third argument leaves Hashem aware and even interested in human events, but choosing to look the other way. It is not honorable for Him to have to interpose Himself in the petty concerns, conflicts and events of human beings.

Chanah's peroration addresses all three. She admonishes the first group. "Do not abound in speaking with loftiness upon loftiness," i.e., do not claim that G-d is so lofty that He cannot know of human conduct. Her message continues with a consideration of the other two groups, first combining them into one position: "Let not haughtiness come from your mouth." In other words, refrain from making the claim that He is so aloof from human affairs that His knowledge of them is of no effect.

She then offers her counter-assertions to all three, serially. To those who maintain that G-d cannot know of human events, she says, "Hashem is the G-d of thoughts." Since it was Hashem Who created human minds, how could it be that He does not know their content?

To the second group she says, "Deeds are accounted by Him." He cares, and he holds Man accountable for his actions. He does so because He gave Man unusual ability to impact the world around him. Man's actions build up and destroy. A medrash[3] reacts to a verse in Amos[4] "He forms mountains and creates winds. He recounts his deeds to a person." What is it that Hashem recounts to a person? That a person's actions form mountains and create winds. Hashem potentiated human activity to have far greater impact than Man might think. So long as Hashem has an interest and purpose for His world, He most assuredly takes interest in Man's activities, because those activities either advance His purposes, or impede them.

To the third group, Chanah addresses the same phrase, but meant slightly differently. The keri - the way traditions tells us to read the verse, even if the written form differs - of the verse has the word spelled with an aleph. This changes the meaning to "Deeds are not accounted by Him." Elements of reward and punishment do not require His intercession, so to speak. He does not need to do the accounting directly. He set up His world in a manner in which deeds have consequences; He need not "do" anything for those consequences - both positive and negative - to occur.

We can imagine our world as somewhat similar to a large machine. If a child were to climb past the barriers and reach into the innards of the apparatus while it was operating, his arm would be mangled. Objecting to the owner of the machine that it is not fair that an innocent child should be hurt will be of no consequence. Neither the owner nor the machine can be told to look the other way. Nor would following that suggestion help the poor child. The machine operates blindly, without differentiating between one person and the next. There is nothing unfair about this. Nor should the owner be seen as the agent of the child's loss. Similarly, Hashem created a world in which there are consequences to spiritual misconduct just as there are consequences to disobeying the constraints of physical laws.

Briefly, a firm, non-trivial consideration of Hashem as Creator creates the intellectual space in which we understand Hashem's concern for the consequences of human actions, and His equipping the world with the capacity to reward and punish those actions.

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1. *Based on Ha'amek Davar and Harchev Davar, Devarim 32:4*
 2. Shmuel¹ 2:3 The translation follows the written text, which has the word lo spelled with a vav.
 3. Vayikra Rabbah 26:7
 4. Amos 4:13
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