

DIVINE PROVIDENCE, NOT COINCIDENCE

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

And God called to Moshe, and spoke to him out of the Tent of Meeting, saying...(Vayikra 1:1)

There is no such thing as chance or coincidence, only Divine Providence, or in Hebrew, Hashgochah Pratis. As the Nefesh HaChaim explains at the very beginning of his sefer, every second God is recreating Creation anew, and directing all of it every second. We may have free-will, but even that is heavily influenced by events that God creates and circumstances into which He puts us.

Others would beg to differ. They have no proof for their point of view, but surmise it based upon their understanding of history and their own personal life experience. They say, "If there was a God, then shouldn't Event A have occurred, and Event B, not have happened?" It's as if they say, "If I were God, I would do X, and I certainly would not do Y!" Since God does not fit into their understanding of what God should be like, they think that He must not exist.

I was recently directed by a reader to view a short clip by a Murray Gell-Mann on the topic of Emergence. Murray Gell-Mann, born September 15, 1929, into a family of Jewish immigrants, is an American physicist who received the 1969 Nobel Prize in physics for his work on the theory of elementary particles. He is currently the Presidential Professor of Physics and Medicine at the University of Southern California. Clearly he is a highly intelligent person.

His main point of the presentation that I saw was that "you don't need something more to get something more." For example, he says, "life can emerge from physics and chemistry—plus a lot of accidents. The human mind can arise from neurobiology—and a lot of accidents." And when a reader of his book asked him, "Isn't there something more beyond what you have there?" presumably something supernatural, he laughed at the question and said, "Anyways, there isn't."

It never ceases to amaze me how people with such great minds can make such great mistakes. But then again, I've dealt with this issue before many times, and it is the basis of the introduction to my book, "The Big Picture: Thirty-six Sessions to Intellectual and Spiritual Clarity." The assumption is that if someone like this is so smart, he ought to be able to see God if He is in fact there. If he is so smart, the assumption continues, and he doesn't see God, then God must not be there.

But, it is more like being a top physicist, with little or no knowledge of classical music, and listening to a piece by Bach while sitting next to a maestro. In spite of his intelligence and expertise in physics, more than likely he will not be able to appreciate the recital on the same level as the expert musician, and any comment the physicist may make will probably fall short.

"How about you stick to your area of expertise," the maestro might politely tell the scientist, "while I stick to mine."

However, I find it fascinating that while explaining how "life can emerge from physics and chemistry," Gell-Mann is quick to add the words, "and a lot of accidents." When saying, in a mocking tone that "the human mind can emerge from neurobiology," he finishes off by repeating, "and a lot of accidents."

A lot accidents? Is that not a contradiction of his initial premise that "you don't need something more to get something more"? Are the accidents not something more you need to allow neurobiology, chemistry, and physics to do their things?

In other words, what we call Hashgochah Pratis—Divine Providence—Gell-Mann calls 'accidents,' or more specifically, random events that occur merely as a function of physical creation and nothing more. They either happen or they don't happen. If they do, then something wonderful can result. If they don't, then it won't, and that's just life in this world.

But, though he may be an expert physicist, he possesses a mind that is committed to deal with laws of Creation only as they emerge from physical Creation. More than likely he is a firm believer that "what you see is what you get," and no more. If it is not visible to the eye, measurable by accepted scientific methods, and reproducible in a laboratory, then it is off his grid, and that of many of today's greatest scientists.

And, many people laugh along with him (and did on the video). For they figure that since both Gell-Mann and Creationists deal with the origins of existence and the physics of everyday reality, they are talking about one and the same thing. And, since such physicists bring proof for their theories from the world around us, while Creationists allow faith to be their guiding principle in life, a self-honest intellectual, many believe, must side with the physicist and at least be skeptical about the existence of God and a Divine purpose to Creation.

A tragic mistake, as this week's parshah explains. And, the point is both simple and yet fundamental. Indeed, it is represented by a small letter Aleph at the end of the first word of this week's parshah—vayikra—the primary letter of the Aleph-Bais. Its message is very deep.

As Rashi explains, it is the Aleph of vayikra that stands between the Moshe Rabbeinus and Bilaams of history. For the Moshe Rabbeinus, God is not only Omnipresent, He is accessible. This is the word vayikra, with the Aleph, indicating the continuous relationship that Moshe Rabbeinu enjoyed with the Master of the Universe.

For the Bilaams of history, not only is God not Omniscient (Rashi, Bamidbar 22:9), but He is completely inaccessible, unless He chooses otherwise. This is the word vayikar—without the Aleph—from the word mikreh, which means, to borrow the words of Gell-Mann, "a lot of accidents." It is the perception of events being random, as opposed to the result of a specific will of God.

I can't say for sure, but it almost seems as if the basic premise of the atheist is, if God really existed, He'd want us to see Him, and rather easily. Therefore, if it is not perfectly clear to us that He is here, then it must be that He isn't. "Why," the Atheists seem to ask, "would God exist and hide—which includes bad things happening to good people and good things happening to bad people—His Presence from mankind?"

It also includes nature, which is cause-and-effect based. It's as if life should be either natural or supernatural, but that it can't be both. For the skeptic, there is no such thing as the supernatural reality of the natural world. "The human mind can arise from neurobiology—and a lot of accidents," which, for the believer means Divine Providence, but which for the doubter means weird events we haven't quite figured out yet.

Based upon this, I'd like to offer an additional pshat for the small letter Aleph in this week's parshah. The first four letters—Vav-Yud-Kuf-Raish—like the everyday physical world that they represent, are quite visible. The last letter, the Aleph, like the invisible spiritual world it represents is small and elevated, and far less visible than the previous letters, especially from a distance.

Yet, it controls all of the letters before it, determining their overall value. With the Aleph, they are part of a Godly and eternal experience. Without the Aleph, they are empty and tenuous, associated with a spiritually-void world, the world of physicists like Stephen Hawking and Murray Gell-Mann. They can see the Vav-Yud-Kuf-Raish perfectly well, perhaps even better than most, but they are blind to the Aleph.

The question is why, and the answer is alluded to by the Aleph itself, and described quite well by the following quote:

Among the causes of this scientific tunnel vision I would like to discuss two that result from the nature of scientific tradition. The first of these is the issue of methodology. In its laudable insistence upon experience, accurate observation and verifiability, science has placed great emphasis upon measurement. To measure something is to experience it in a certain dimension, a dimension in which we can make observations of great accuracy which are repeatable by others. The use of measurement has enabled science to make enormous strides in the understanding of the material universe. But by virtue of its success, measurement has become a scientific idol. The result is an attitude on the part of many scientists of not only skepticism but outright rejection of what cannot be measured. It is as if they were to say, 'What we cannot measure, we cannot know; there is no point in worrying about what we can't know; therefore, what cannot be measured is unimportant and unworthy of observation.' Because of this attitude many scientists exclude from their serious consideration all matters that are—or seem to be—intangible. Including, of course, the matter of God ... The other development that is assisting us to escape scientific tunnel vision is the relatively recent discovery by science of the reality of paradox. A hundred years ago paradox meant scientific error to the scientific mind.

But, exploring such phenomena as the nature of light, electromagnetism, quantum mechanics and relativity theory, physical science has matured over the past century to the point where it is increasingly recognized that at a certain level reality is paradoxical." (The Road Less Traveled, III Growth and Religion, Scientific Tunnel Vision; Simon and Schuster, 1978)

Measurement, explains Kabbalah, was also a creation. Indeed, it was one of the first phases of Creation, to make possible a spiritual environment that would support free-will and therefore, spiritual growth. But, prior to that, there was only Ohr Ain Sof, the unlimited, non-measurable light of God. At that stage, nothing physical had been created, and even spiritual entities such as angels couldn't even exist. Just the infinite light of God.

And, even after the sublime will of God resulted in the creation of the world by constricting the Ohr Ain Sof, making possible the reality of measurement, still the Ohr Ain Sof remained the spiritual 'backbone' of everything. As a result, everything physical that exists has a core of supernatural reality; everything measurable has a non-measurable essence that exists beyond the realm of the physical brain and concrete laboratories.

This is what the Aleph is telling us in this week's parshah. It is saying that, what you see is not all that you get. Beyond that which you can see is something invisible. Beyond that which you can measure is something that cannot be measured. The random reality that you think you perceive is really a very well-orchestrated system run by Heaven with tremendous precision. The randomness and chaos of daily life in our vast universe is perfectly controlled.

What the Aleph is also saying is that you have to choose to see this for yourself. Just as you have to look a little more carefully at the Sefer Torah to see the smaller Aleph than the rest of the letters, likewise you have to look more carefully in everyday life to see the hand of God behind all of it.

That is not just a part of life, that is life itself. That is when you connect to God on a sublime and eternal level, and fulfill your destiny. It is the essence of what it means to serve God, and ultimately, to serve yourself. For, the study of physical Creation is a fascinating hobby, but nothing is more fulfilling than being able to see God behind every aspect of life, and to be able to call on Him when you need to. And, nothing speaks more highly of a person than for God to be able to call on Him whenever He wants to.

Text

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